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**EDDY LATIMER'S ESCAPE
AND
OTHER STORIES
BY
CHARLOTTE M. BRAEME.**



PUBLISHER
GEO. MUNRO.
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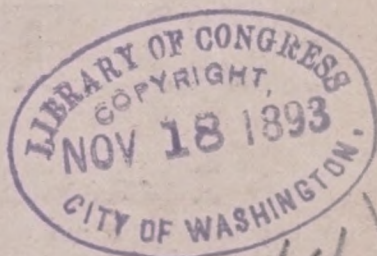
LADY LATIMER'S ESCAPE,

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BY

✓
CHARLOTTE M. BRAEME.

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LADY LATIMER'S ESCAPE.

CHAPTER I.

FATE IS AGAINST SOME PEOPLE FROM THE CRADLE TO
THE GRAVE.

“Change is the law of wind and moon and lover—
And yet I think, lost Love, had you been true,
Some golden fruits had ripened for your plucking
You will not find in gardens that are new.”

MANY years have come and gone in my life since this eventful one of which my story tells. My name is Audrey Lovel, and I am the eldest daughter of the Reverend Archibald Lovel, and Millicent, his wife. The Reverend Archibald has been for many years Vicar of St. Hubert's Church at King's Lorton. He lives in a beautiful, old-fashioned vicarage, just outside the town of King's Lorton, a house such as you see in illustrated Christmas annuals, with gable ends and great stacks of chimneys, and great windows with pleasant seats in the deep bays. Tangles of roses and jasmine cover it in the summer; in the winter there is a wealth of green holly. A large, old-fashioned garden surrounds it, where every kind of tree grows and flower blooms. A bright, sunny orchard lies beyond that, the gates of which lead into the clover meadow, and at the foot of the meadow runs the clear, deep, beautiful river Linne, the loveliest river in England, and the great torment of my mother's life, for the boys were always coming to grief over it, either skating when the ice was not an inch thick, or swimming when the current was too strong—rowing when the wind was against them—fishing and falling head-first into the stream. That river was the one blot on my mother's otherwise happy life.

My father, not being by any means a rich man, was

blessed with the usual large number of children. He was heard to say, despairingly, that he should cease to count them after the number of seven was reached.

We were nine in all. Six hearty, healthy, happy, hungry boys, and three girls. I was the eldest. Then came the eldest son, certainly the most terrible boy in the world. My mother used to say of him, "Bob is all a boy," and that means a great deal. Archie, the second, was not quite his equal in mischief, but he had every desire to be so. Willie, the third, was a quiet, well-behaved boy, who lived in continual fear of his two elder brothers. Then came a sweet, fair-haired little maiden; it was rest for one's eyes to look upon her. She was called after our mother, Millicent. Then three more boys, the sole object of whose existence seemed to be eating and noise, varied with skirmishes of all kinds, carried on in all places and at all times—skirmishes that almost made my hair stand on end. Then came the last, sweetest, fairest, and best, a wonderfully fat, lovely baby girl, named Trottie; the roundest, prettiest baby ever seen, worshiped by the family, adored by the boys.

"The boys!" Does any sympathetic reader know what that means? If you suddenly hear a tremendous crash like the roar of artillery, or a great upheaval like a tropical earthquake, and you ask in alarm, "What is it?" the inevitable answer is, "The boys." If there is a rush up and down the staircase, followed by sudden shrieks, unearthly noises, succeeded by silence even more terrible, and you ask, "What is it?" "The boys." Any unexpected explosion, any unforeseen accident, any unthought-of hap, had but one source, "the boys."

Yet how we loved them, and what fine, manly fellows they were! But they were the very torment of our lives. How they enjoyed luring that unhappy little maiden, Millie, into the most unheard-of situations. The only one they held in supreme awe was Baby Trottie, who ruled them with a rod of iron.

A large, happy, healthy family, and at the time this story opens I was just eighteen. I had, thanks to my father's insistence, received an excellent education, and was now supposed to be helping my mother.

Being the eldest daughter, I had certain privileges. I had a dear little room of my own, the window of which

overlooked the green meadow and the lovely brimming river. I had the entry to my father's library, a privilege which "the boys" most virtuously shunned. Altogether I loved and enjoyed my life, with its simple duties and pleasures. I had thought little of love and lovers. The boys absorbed all my leisure time—to save them from drowning, to keep them from breaking their necks by sliding down the great carved balusters, exhorting them as much as possible not to climb the very tallest trees in search of birds'-nests, and preventing them from throwing stones quite close to the windows.

My father took life very easily—the boys seemed to look upon him as a beloved friend and a natural enemy; no skirmishes were indulged in in his presence, no practical jokes. When they had misbehaved themselves to any great extent, they were very wary in turning corners, lest he should spring upon them suddenly, and a peculiar shrill whistle was the signal for clearing the coast; it meant that he was coming, and that summary justice might be expected. My father was a well-bred gentleman, and a splendid scholar; he spent the greater part of his life in writing and reading. His income was a small one, but my mother managed it.

My mother was one of the sweetest and most gracious of women, loved by every one, the soul of generosity and kindness. She never raised her voice, even to the boys. She was essentially a motherly woman, and the boys were the pride, the delight, the torment, and joy of her life. She was well born, well bred, a lady in every sense of the word. She could make puddings and cakes, darn stockings, and yet in the drawing-room she had all the graces and sweet stateliness of an accomplished lady. I may mention that the boys' wardrobe was something fearful to behold, but my mother understood it.

There was no affluence, no luxury in our house; and, indeed, there was a difficulty in making both ends meet. But we were very happy, very loving, devoted to one another. There was no quarreling; a terrific fight among the boys did not always mean a quarrel. There was no selfishness; there is no such school for learning self-denial and self-control as a large family.

About two miles from the vicarage stood the grandest mansion in the county, the residence of Lord Latimer, the

greatest man in the county, and it was called Lorton's Cray. It was the wonder of our childish lives. A magnificent mansion, with thick, gray, ivy-covered walls. It had been built in the reign of Queen Elizabeth, and held every beauty of the architecture of that period. The rooms were all large and lofty, with great windows; the floors and staircases were all of polished oak, the ceilings painted, the entrance hall a marvel of stained-glass windows, with a magnificent groined roof.

Once or twice in our lives we had been allowed to go through this house. It produced such an impression on the boys that they were silent for some days afterward. The picture-gallery ran the whole length of the house, and held some priceless paintings. The portraits of the Latimers for many generations past hung there, with a fine collection of modern paintings.

The drawing-room was a magnificent apartment; we held our breath as we stood on the threshold; even Bob and Archie collapsed—they were speechless. It was all white and gold. There was no color except the rich bloom of the rare flowers that stood in the jardinières; the hangings were of white velvet and white satin embroidered with gold; chairs, couches, lounges the same. From the large windows there was a superb view of the square of fountains and the deep green of the rich foliage beyond.

There was a spacious banqueting-hall, a cozy dining-room, a library that was unequalled for its size, a morning-room opening on to a rose garden. The great state apartments were in the eastern wing. There were innumerable pretty little rooms, innumerable pretty nooks and corners in the old house.

It was a house full of surprises; where it was least expected one would find a large window with comfortable seats, a lonely little room, a door opening on to a quaint staircase that led to the grounds. Then, all over the place there was a perfect wealth of ornaments, the accumulated treasures of long generations—and the Latimers had always been very wealthy.

The grounds were magnificent; the fine old trees, the beautiful, undulating park, the lovely fairy dells where violets and cowslips grew, the matchless terraces, the broad marble steps that led from one to the other—it was all beautiful.

When we came from our last visit, my young brothers looked at me with contemplative, solemn eyes.

"Audrey," said Bob, "you will be, I think, good-looking. I hope you will remember your brothers, and marry well."

"A brother-in-law with a house like that would suit me," said Archie, emphatically.

"Of course, as your brothers, we should be offered the run of the house," said Bob. "In fact, it would doubtless be thrown open to us."

How little I thought, while they teased me and enjoyed themselves over this future brother-in-law—how little I dreamed of what was to be!

Lord Latimer had not been to King's Lorton within my recollection. The house was beautifully kept. There was a faithful old housekeeper, Mrs. Heath; an ancient butler, who seemed to be part of the place; and plenty of servants. Everything was kept in readiness; no matter when or how the old lord might return, he would have found everything prepared for him at any moment. For some years there was no mention made of Lord Latimer's return; all at once we heard that he was coming back, and bringing with him a young wife.

"A young wife!" cried my mother, when she heard it. "Why, that must be impossible; that must be untrue; he is over sixty."

"Yes," replied my father, incautiously enough, considering the boys were all round him; "but then he is a very well-preserved man."

And the boys spent the remainder of the day in trying to find out what a "well-preserved man" was, and then making caricatures of him.

CHAPTER II.

THE news of Lord Latimer's marriage and return spread like wild-fire over the county; nothing else was spoken of.

"It will be good for us and good for the poor," said my father. "Lord Latimer is very generous."

But I noticed one thing—my father never spoke of any other quality of the earl. He was generous, and he attended church regularly—two fine qualities.

Our children were all on the *qui vive* to see the new lady

of Lorton's Cray. We heard that the old lord had suddenly returned without having given one moment's warning, bringing with him his young wife and her lady's-maid. She was beautiful, they said, as an angel, her hair glittered like gold, and her face was fair as the dawn of the morning. She wore rich dresses of strange texture, and rare jewels. Some said she was proud and capricious, others that she was most loving and gentle. Every one gave a different opinion of her, and she had made a different impression on every person who had seen her—from which fact my father argued that she must be a wonderful woman.

Lord Latimer rode over to see my father the day after his arrival, an act of attention which delighted him. He behaved most generously—he gave him a check for the poor, a check for the church; he promised to assist with some alterations on which my father had set his heart; he inquired after the number of children at the vicarage, smiled when he heard there were six boys; he was—and we all liked him best for that—most amiable and agreeable to our dear mother; he spoke of his wife, said the journey had tired her, and that she was not quite well—but there was a curious tightening of the lips as he spoke of her.

The next day was Sunday, and we were all interested, knowing that we should see Lady Latimer at church. I need not say that our family pew was a sight to be remembered. Nine healthy, happy faces ornamented it. I am sorry to add that the conduct of the inmates was not always above suspicion. If Bob looked particularly devout, or Archie collected and calm, I knew that a dire catastrophe impended. It is not in boys' human nature to remain quiet for more than ten minutes, if for so long.

I am ashamed to confess with what longing of impatience we awaited the coming of the Lorton's Cray party to church. Bob, who excelled himself in wickedness that morning, was busy, I could see, making a caricature on one of the side leaves of his prayer-book. Archie was making a desperate effort to become possessed of it. Millie, seated between the two belligerents, had a terrible time of it, and looked ready to cry.

I had just restored order when they came. I saw something that looked to me like a vision of grace and loveliness floating up the aisle of the old church. I saw rich

silk and velvet sweep the ground, priceless lace fall in perfumed folds, jewels gleam here and there; in the breathless silence the soft *frou-frou* of the rich silk was distinctly heard.

I did not see her face until she was seated in the pew and all the excitement incident upon their coming was over; then I looked at her. I loved her that first moment; I have loved her ever since, and I shall love her until I die.

In what words can I tell the dainty, marvelous beauty of that fair young face, the perfection of its features, the loveliness of its coloring? It was the perfection of fair and brilliant beauty.

A low, white brow, round which golden rings of hair clustered, shining rings of rich, rare gold; delicate, level brows, dark, beautiful eyes, a mouth that seemed at once all good and all sweetness, a delicate chin, perfectly molded—a face that, once seen, could never be forgotten.

She looked to me beautiful as the pictured angels in the old gallery at Lorton's Cray. Yet it was the face of a woman, not of an angel; and when I came to look more deeply into it, I saw uneasiness, languor, pride; at times unutterable fatigue, unutterable scorn, then something like despair; the light died from the proud eyes, and the lines deepened round the beautiful lips.

All at once I started with amazement; for she was looking at our pew, and I saw a smile pass like a sunbeam over her face. I looked at the long row of children; they were all, outwardly, at least, decently behaved. One or two of them had their eyes and mouths opened very wide, and were fascinated by Lady Latimer. Then her eyes met mine, and I saw in them a tender light, a beautiful gleam. The old lord, looking very stern and gray, sat by her side—May and December, indeed.

More than once I caught the beautiful eyes fixed on mine. I can not tell how it was, but a certain conviction came to me that she was not happy. Despite her grand title of Lady Latimer, of Lorton's Cray; despite her beauty, which was greater than I had ever seen; despite her rich dress and her jewels and the magnificence that surrounded her, she was not happy. I can not tell how it happened, but it seemed to me her eyes were telling me

so, and that it was a secret known only to herself and me; but that must have been fancy.

I was like a bird fascinated. I could not look away from her. I am very much afraid that I thought of nothing else. I saw her watch our family procession down the church; always eccentric, it was this time more peculiar than ever, owing to the fact that Bob, whose expression of countenance was perfectly angelic, had pinned Millie's cape to Archie's jacket, and the wildest confusion ensued. We had reached home before it ended. Impartial justice was administered later on.

The next day Lord and Lady Latimer called. The army of boys had been sent to King's Lorton, under the pretext of purchasing a new cricket bat. Our pretty vicarage looked its best. It was the month of May, and the lilacs were all in bloom; the beautiful syringa-trees were all in flower; the house was a perfect bower; the birds were singing in the trees all round it.

I shall never forget how the fair, queenly presence of that beautiful woman brightened even our cheerful rooms. She was in the drawing-room when I went in, talking to my mother. Lord Latimer was discussing a late edition of Virgil with my father. Lady Latimer held out her hand to me, with a smile so bright and beautiful it almost dazzled me.

"I saw you in church yesterday, Miss Lovel," she said, "and I have come to ask you if you will be my friends."

If I could describe her grace, her sweetness! If she had said to me, "Audrey Lovel, from this moment you become my bond-slave, and attach yourself to me for life," I should have done so. I loved her after the fashion of enthusiastic young girls, with a full and perfect love.

"I have been telling Mrs. Lovel," she continued, "how much your face attracted me. I wanted to see you yesterday."

She had a wonderfully sweet voice, low and caressing. She went on:

"And those delightful boys of yours, how I enjoyed seeing them! I am sorry they are out. Mrs. Lovel, you must let me have them all over at Lorton's Cray."

My mother smiled.

"I am afraid, Lady Latimer," she said, "you would hardly survive it. A French revolution or a Cuban insur-

rection is bad enough; but the boys visiting together is something beyond imagination even;" and the dear, gentle mother smiled as she thought of it.

"Nevertheless," said Lady Latimer, "I shall hope to see them. It is very lonely at Lorton's Cray."

And I saw, plainly as I heard the words, a fine, quick gleam of scorn that lighted for half a minute on her husband's face, and then was gone. But he turned quickly to her.

"Are you dull and lonely, Grace?" he asked. "I am sorry. You will soon have plenty of visitors."

For a few minutes he was moody and silent, then he turned suddenly to my mother.

"Mrs. Lovel," he said, "it is in your power to do me the greatest favor. You hear that Lady Latimer complains of feeling dull; will you allow Miss Lovel to pay us a visit? In fact, if it will be convenient to you, to go back with us now? It will be a pleasure to Lady Latimer and myself."

The beautiful face brightened, the gracious hand was held out to me.

"How kind! Will you come, Miss Lovel? I should be so delighted."

If she had said, "Will you come to Siberia with me?" I should have gone. Her fair, queenly beauty, the mystery in the dark eyes, and her gracious, winning manner had laid me under a spell.

"It will be a great pleasure to me, Lady Latimer," I answered.

"And you will tell me all about the boys?" she said.

"All about the boys would mean a long biography of each one," I answered; "but I will give you the leading points in each career."

"That will do," she rejoined, laughingly. "I am so glad you will come, Miss Lovel."

Then I went to my own room to make some preparations, and my mother followed me.

"It seems a strange thing, mamma," I said, "for Lady Latimer to want me, and to wish to take me home with her now."

"I do not think it strange, Audrey," she said, "not at all. Evidently, Lady Latimer is very dull and very lonely, and Lord Latimer is anxious that she should have a

companion. I think, my dear," added my beautiful mother, with a gentle sigh, "that it is an excellent thing for you. It will bring you into good society; indeed, I think it is most providential for us all. Lady Latimer has evidently taken a fancy to you. It will be good for the boys, too."

Now, anything for the good of the boys was as irresistible to me as to my mother, and a glorious vision of unlimited toys and fruit came before our eyes.

"I should think," said my mother, "that Lady Latimer is about your age, Audrey; she does not look one day older."

"And her husband more than sixty!" I cried. "It seems very unnatural, mamma."

"Such marriages are often made in high life," said my mother. She bent down and kissed me. "I am glad," she said, "that we do not belong to what is called high life. I should not like you, my Audrey, to marry in that fashion. I wonder how long you will stay at Lorton's Cray?"

"Two or three days, most probably," I replied. "Mamma, do you know that the first moment I saw Lady Latimer—the first moment that her eyes looked into mine, I knew that we should be something to each other? Her eyes said so plainly."

"Fancy, my dear," answered my gentle mother. I knew it was not fancy, but truth.

CHAPTER III.

My few preparations were soon made. Lord Latimer was profuse in his thanks to my parents. It was so good, so kind, so generous of them to spare me; he was so grateful. It was such a sad thing for Lady Latimer to feel herself so dull—so unfortunate; but in my cheerful society no doubt she would rally. His words sounded kindly, but there was an evil look in the old lord's eyes as he uttered them.

Then we all three drove away together, and the wonder, the dream of my life, came true—I was at home at Lorton's Cray. "What would the boys say?" That was my first thought as we drove along, and I longed to hear the remarks and comments that would be made in the august

assembly. Then my companions attracted all my attention. I began to see why Lady Latimer was dull and lonely. The old lord was by no means a pleasant, amusing, or even agreeable companion; he was silent and saturnine. If he expressed an idea, it was either false, mean, or ignoble; if he uttered a sentiment, it was either sordid or cynical; if he made a remark, it was sure to jar in some way or other on one. He talked to me during the greater part of the drive; he could not forget that Lady Latimer had complained of feeling dull; he seemed to resent it as an insult to himself; he reverted to it continually.

If I had been Lady Latimer, I should have lost both temper and patience; but when she saw the turn things were taking, she leaned back in the carriage and said nothing.

What weariness crept over that beautiful face! What sadness came into the proud eyes! The bright May sunshine, the hawthorn on the hedges, the flowering limes, the springing grasses brought no smiles to her lips. I was almost dazed with delight to drive on that lovely spring day through that delicious, odorous air. To see the depths of the blue sky, the light of the sun, the bloom of the spring flowers; to hear the lark and the thrush, the bleating of the little lambs in the meadows—had filled me with delight that was almost intoxicating; my heart and soul, my whole nature, seemed to expand. But on the beautiful face opposite to me there was no smile. I do not remember that husband and wife exchanged one word. Verily, May and December, eighteen and sixty, could never agree.

When the carriage stopped before the great entrance-hall door, and I stood on the threshold of Lorton's Cray, a curious sensation came over me—a foreboding, but such a mixture of sorrow and joy I could not understand it. I felt the shadow of coming evil and the brightness of coming joy. The emotion was so strong that I felt all the color die from my face and lips; my heart beat, my hands trembled. It seemed to me that I had gone quite suddenly into another world. Lord Latimer gave me a very kind but stately welcome.

"You look tired, Miss Lovel," he said; "you had better have a glass of wine."

"Come with me to my room, Miss Lovel," said Lady

Latimer, not seeming to heed her husband's words; and we went up the grand staircase together.

Ah, what luxury! what magnificence! what splendor! I was struck by the great white marble statues, holding aloft richly colored lamps, masses of crimson flowers at their feet. She swept up the grand staircase, looking neither to the right nor the left, and hastened to her room.

"That's a relief," she cried, as she sunk into the depths of an easy-chair; "a most blessed and unmitigated relief."

"What is?" I asked, wonderingly.

Her face crimsoned.

"To get in-doors," she answered, quickly; but I felt sure that she did not mean that when she spoke first.

Then Lady Latimer rose from her chair. She took off her hat and mantle.

"I prefer dressing and undressing myself to having a maid always about me," she said. "Shall I ring for Hilton for you?"

"I have never had a maid in my life," I answered, thinking of the toilets at home and the struggle to get through them.

"That is right," she said, heartily.

I looked round that magnificent sleeping-room. The hangings were all of blue velvet and white silk; the carpet of light-blue velvet pile with white flowers; a few exquisite pictures adorned the walls; ornaments of every description abounded; the toilet-tables seemed to me one blaze of silver and richly cut glass; one door opened into a bathroom superbly fitted; another into a beautiful boudoir, all blue and white. A balcony ran along the windows, filled with the loveliest, rarest, and most fragrant flowers. Everything that money could purchase or art suggest was in those beautiful rooms. I thought to myself, as I looked around, "How enviably happy the owner of all this magnificence must be!" I was soon to find out that all the magnificence in the world could not confer happiness.

"Come into the boudoir," said Lady Latimer. - "How pleasant it is to have some one to talk to and laugh with. There are days when my very nature seems starved for want of laughter."

"And we have so much of it," I said, involuntarily.

"Yes. When I saw that row of smiling, happy faces at church, my heart went out to them; the tears came into

my eyes, and I longed to be among them." She drew me to herself in a half-caressing fashion inexpressibly graceful. "I am so glad that you came back with me, Miss Lovel. I can never tell you how I felt when I saw you. I am sure that, in some strange manner or other, you are going to make part of my life, or to be involved in it in some way."

"I had the same feeling," I replied, wonderingly.

"Then," said Lady Latimer, "it is true, and there is something in it. I am grateful, for I was very lonely, and needed a friend. You have such a frank face, so noble and true. You are dark and beautiful. I like dark, beautiful faces. You are sympathetic; I need sympathy. We shall be good friends, Miss Lovel."

"I hope so," was my answer. I knew that in my heart I loved her well enough to be her constant friend all my life. Then she threw off the sadness and weariness that lay over her like a shadow.

"Miss Lovel," she said, "have you been over the house?"

"Two years ago," I answered; and I told her of the great awe that had fallen over the boys at the sight of all the magnificence. Laughingly I told her also how they had implored me to marry some one with a house just like this, for their special use and benefit.

"There is many a truth spoken in jest," said Lady Latimer; "but never do that, my dear; let nothing ever tempt you to marry for the sake of a grand house, or money, or position. It is the most terrible mistake that a woman ever makes. Sooner die than do that."

"I never shall, Lady Latimer," I replied; then, thinking of home, I added: "I should never have a chance, no matter even if I might desire it." Our only visitors were the curate and the doctor.

"You might be tempted some day," she said. "You are beautiful enough, and you have a charm all your own. Remember my words: rather die a hundred deaths than make a miserable marriage. Now come and let us see the house."

We went over that vast mansion together, and the more I saw of Lady Latimer, the more I loved her. When we had been together some time, I forgot that she was anything but a girl like myself.

We Lovels had always been famous for two things; one

was a light-hearted love of laughter, the other was the keenness with which we saw the humorous side of everything. We may have been deficient in some finer qualities, but we certainly made up for it in these. We saw subjects for fun and laughter where other people were solemn as judges. It was this particular quality which made the vicarage the very home of merriment, and which made us popular wherever we went.

When Lady Latimer and I had been together for a few hours, she laughed heartily and naturally as I did. We went over the whole house, and its vast extent, its magnificence, completely astonished me. It was like unravelling a fairy tale; but I saw that this alone would not make any one happy.

I remember that in the library there was a very beautiful picture; it was of a young man, quite young, not more than twenty years of age, wearing the picturesque uniform of the Life Guards. A face that attracted and charmed me, for it had the dark, chivalrous beauty of the knights of old—dark, luminous eyes full of fire and courage, dark, level brows that nearly met, a proud, firm mouth half covered with a dark mustache, such a face as one sees in the pictures of Spanish knights and princes, yet with a gleam of human tenderness in the eyes that arrested you, and made you stand still before it.

“Who is that, Lady Latimer?” I asked. “Is it the portrait of a person living or—”

But I could not utter the word “dead” in conjunction with that beautiful, noble face.

“Living,” she replied. “Now, Audrey, who is that? Try to guess.”

I could not, for I knew nothing of the Latimers, except that they existed, and I told her so. She was looking at the picture with smiling eyes.

“That is Lionel Fleming,” she said, “heir at law and next of kin to Lord Latimer.”

I knew as little of the laws of entail as I did of Greek. I looked up at her, quite puzzled.

“He is not Lord Latimer’s son,” I said.

She laughed.

“No; he is but very distantly related to him,” she answered; “but, for all that, when the present Lord Lati-

mer dies, Lionel Fleming will succeed him, and become Baron Latimer, of Lorton's Cray."

"Do you know him well?" I asked.

"No. I have only seen him once or twice. He is quartered at Windsor. He will be here in September for the shooting. You seem to admire his face, Audrey."

"I do," was my almost breathless reply. "I have seen nothing so beautiful in my life."

"He is the most popular man in London," she said; "and certainly one of the best matches in England. You can form no idea how he is courted and flattered."

"And spoiled?" I interrupted.

"No, not spoiled," she answered. "He is as noble in character as he is beautiful in face."

"A wonder among men," I commented.

"He is a wonder," she answered, dreamily, "as men go."

Wherever I went during the remainder of that day I saw that face, the name sounded ever in my ears.

"Lionel Fleming." I wondered if I should ever see the original. He was coming in September, and doubtless we should be invited to Lorton's Cray. Then I took myself to task for wasting time in thinking of a picture and a name.

CHAPTER IV.

DINNER that evening was a stately, ceremonious affair, unutterably solemn and dull. The earl presided in great state. Everything was of the rarest and best, but dull and cheerless. Lady Latimer's eyes looked at me as though she would say, "Let us make haste and get it over, and get away again." I could imagine what those dinners were like when she was quite alone with the old lord.

She was quite a different Lady Latimer then. It seemed as though all the brightness and the sparkle died out of her. She looked bored by everything. She eat little and drank less. She looked unutterably wearied. Very few words were spoken, and it was a great relief when we withdrew. We went to the drawing-room, where the lamps were lighted, but not turned on full.

"Come, Audrey, to the terrace," she said, "and let us

see the May moon shining over the trees and the fountains."

As we stood watching it, she suddenly caught my hand, and with a passionate gesture I shall never forget, she cried:

"Oh, Audrey, Audrey! is life worth living, after all?"

I was very much puzzled by Lady Latimer. It seemed to me that having so much money, living in such a magnificent house, the fact of being surrounded by every possible luxury under the sun, ought to have made her at least content. If she had passed through those magnificent rooms with a smile or a snatch of song on her lips, or the light of a glad content in her eyes, I could have understood. She seemed to have two moods. When she was with the old lord, silence, weariness, with a certain fine scorn of all and everything; when she was with me, of simple, almost child-like merriment. When it was possible for her to escape the stately, gloomy presence of her husband, she did so, and then it was to hurry to me and beg that I would go out with her; and when we were in the woods together she forgot that she was Lady Latimer, and ran after butterflies, gathered wild flowers like any simple country girl. We spent hours in those bonny Lorton Woods. They were like fairy-land. The boughs of the trees met overhead, so that the sunlight which fell on the green grass below became filtered, as it were, through the leaves; a beautiful brook ran through the wood, singing, rippling, clear as crystal, so that one could see the pebbles plainly in its bed; blue forget-me-nots grew on its banks, and the green grass was wet with the shining water. The trees in Lorton Woods were strong and tall, with great spreading boughs, and the birds had built nests in them. Surely no other wood or forest ever held so many birds, and surely no other birds ever sung so sweetly as these. Every kind of fern and of wild flower grew there; great sheaves of bluebells, of wild strawberry blossoms, and of the lovely, delicate meadow-sweet. It was a wood full of hidden beauties; we were always finding fresh nooks and corners, each one more beautiful than the other. Lady Latimer loved it. We sat for hours together by the side of the brook, talking on every possible subject except one. We never spoke of herself. I had to go over and over again all the details and routine of our home life.

Lady Latimer loved to hear of my father's study and his sermons, and how he visited the sick, and how nervous he was if a baby cried while he was baptizing it; how he cheered the old people, and how kind he was to the young men and maidens of his parish; how he loved the boys, and secretly enjoyed the fun of them. She liked to hear about my mother.

"I should think, Audrey," she said to me one day, "from your description, that your mother must be that wonder of wonders—a perfect woman. She is a saint in church, a help in the study, a manager in the kitchen, a mother in the nursery, and a lady in the drawing-room."

"She is all that," I answered, laughing, although my eyes were full of tears; that was my mother's portrait to perfection.

Lady Latimer liked best of all to hear about the boys; their adventures, their escapades, their desperate encounters, their daily deadly peril of life and limb, amused her more than anything else. She would talk to me of myself, and what would be my probable fate. I could see nothing before me but a few more quiet years at home, then probably a marriage with a High Church curate; but Lady Latimer would laugh and assure me there was something more than that in store for me.

"We shall see what those dark eyes and that dark hair of yours will do for you, Audrey," she would say. For my own part, I could not imagine why Nature had made me, the oldest of nine children and the daughter of a country vicar, beautiful.

During all those long hours, when life at the vicarage was dissected and laid bare, no word was ever spoken of herself or of Lord Latimer. The longer I remained with them, the greater grew my wonder that she had married him. He was so old, so dull, so gloomy; she so young, so fair, so gay. But no allusion to her marriage ever crossed her lips or mine. I enjoyed my visit, I loved Lady Latimer; everything and every one was pleasant and agreeable to me, and when the time of my visit ended, I returned to the vicarage. I should like to describe that first night of mine at home—how the boys surrounded me, and would insist upon every detail, the most absorbing of which were what I had to eat and to drink. Their eyes opened widely at the history of one of the dinners at Lorton's Cray.

Charley, who was always suspected of being a gourmand, cried ecstatically, "I wish I had been there!" The result of our conversation was an anxious inquiry as to whether Lady Latimer meant to invite them, and when I told them that she had even fixed on the day, their delight knew no bounds.

I was not much surprised, a few days afterward, to find Lord Latimer in my father's study, and he had come with a request, a petition, a prayer, from Lady Latimer. It was that I might go and live with her entirely. She found herself lonely, and when she was lonely, she was not well. There was a grave consultation between my parents. My mother said how useful I was to her, and how much she should miss my help among the children and in the house. My father said that he had never anticipated any of his daughters leaving home, but the stipend offered, a hundred and fifty pounds per annum, was a large one, and would be a great help with the number of children and the small income. My dear mother argued that I should be able to spare at least one hundred for the use of those at home.

"And that," she added, with a look of wistful tenderness at my father, "that will enable you, dear, to have a glass of wine when you feel so tired."

At last it was decided. My father held out the longest; his pride was touched at the thought that one of his daughters should have to leave home. But even that yielded before the thought of the comfort that that additional hundred per annum would give him.

There was dismay and dread among the boys; there was, in fact, a revolution. Why should Audrey, their own sister and special friend, go away from them to live with Lady Latimer? It was not fair, and they decided in their own especial parlance "not to stand it." Their sister belonged to them, and not to Lady Latimer. They wished now that she had never come to Lorton's Cray. They wanted Audrey for themselves. The dear, gentle mother listened in patience. Then she explained to them the great advantages that must be derived from another hundred per annum, and what a nice thing it would be for me to be always well dressed, and meeting people who moved in high society.

"We are high society, mother," said Bob, reproachfully. "There is no one better than you and my father."

My mother kissed him in her quiet, gentle fashion.

"It will be best, my dear," she said. And then the boys knew that their plan of action had failed.

There was only one comfort for them: living at Lorton's Cray, forming one of that most august household, I should be able to obtain some indulgences for them, such as an occasional ride or drive; and afterward both Lord and Lady Latimer proved very kind in this respect. They were kind altogether; great hampers of game and fruit went from the hall to the vicarage; great parcels of toys came for the boys, but the privilege of riding was the one they valued most.

So it came about that I was installed at Lorton's Cray as companion to its mistress, with a salary of one hundred and fifty per annum, and a nice room of my own. I thought myself the most fortunate of girls.

And now I may come to the heart of my story. I had left the simple, happy home of my youth. I was in a new world, a new sphere of life. I must add this one remark while I am speaking of myself: I was just eighteen, but, like many eldest daughters of large families, I was much older than my years. I had, it seemed to me, passed through the experience of a life-time, and I believe most eldest daughters have the same feeling.

From the minute I entered the house until the strange events happened that close my story, Lady Latimer clung to me with wonderful love. She seemed to rely upon me, to trust me. She never liked to have me out of her sight. No sister ever cared for another as she did for me.

I remember one bright June morning she was standing on the lawn feeding some tame white doves. The sunlight lay on her golden hair, on her white dress, and the cluster of roses at her throat; a picture fair as the day itself. There was a dreamy sadness on her exquisite face. She left the pretty birds, and stood looking over the square of fountains. The beautiful, silvery spray rose high in the air.

I went up to her. Her eyes wore a dreamy, far-off look that I have never seen in any other face.

"How fair it is!" she said. "Do you know, Audrey, the one dream of my life, when I was a child, was to live somewhere near a river, or great fountain, or the sea. My home"—it was the first time she had ever mentioned it to

me—"my home was in the Midlands, the green heart of the land, and I longed to live near water all my life. If there is one thing in this world I love more than another, it is that—the sound of falling water. I think it is the sweetest and most musical of all sounds." We stood side by side for some minutes, watching the falling spray. Suddenly she raised her beautiful face to mine. "Audrey," she said, "is life worth living? I can not make it out. There are times when it seems to me full of interest; and again, I wonder that people care to live. Do you know what has occurred to me this morning?"

"No," I answered, for I could not follow her thoughts.

"I am quite sure," she continued, "that I have missed something in my life. I can not tell what it is. I have missed something that others have; what can it be? It is the want of it, the desire of it, the longing for it, that oppresses me."

I knew what the thing she missed in her life was. It was love—but I did not say so to her.

"It seems to me," she continued, "that even the birds, and the flowers, and the butterflies have this something which I miss."

And I knew that was true. The birds loved one another, and were happy in their leafy nests, the trees loved the flowers, the butterflies loved the sweet white lilies, in whose deep white cups they lingered.

That was the secret of what was amiss in her life—it lacked love. She had money, rank, title; she was mistress of one of the finest mansions in England; she had jewels fit for a queen; she had dresses and costly laces, and everything that a woman's heart could wish or desire; but she had not love, and without it life is like the Dead Sea fruit, fair without and bitter within, and the time had come when she had found it to be so.

The birds sung to one another, the butterflies kissed the sweet roses, the bees clung to the sweet honey-flowers; but she, in the springtide of her youth and beauty, had cut herself adrift from love; for how could smiling May love grim December, and how could sweet eighteen love grim and somber sixty?

CHAPTER V.

LADY LATIMER was very attentive to her husband; she never omitted any of the duties that he expected from her; she answered his letters; she saw that all his papers were cut and prepared for him to read; she was solicitous if he seemed ill; she seldom retorted when he was impatient or angry, which happened very frequently; but she never used any loving words to him, and would sooner have thought of flying than of kissing him. They were not even on such affectionate terms as father and daughter, or uncle and niece, and I soon saw it was want of interest in her life—want of love—that made her sad and thoughtful, tired and wearied, when she ought to have been blithe and gay.

It so happened that among the guests staying that July at Lorton's Cray were Lord and Lady Felton, two young people lately married, and very much in love with each other still. Lord Felton was deeply in love with his pretty wife; and it was pleasant to see his devotion to her, and her smiling, blushing acceptance of it. I saw that Lady Latimer watched these two incessantly; I saw even the color of her face change when Lord Felton took his wife for a moonlight stroll, when he brought her flowers, when he spoke to her in a caressing tone of voice, when he looked at her as though he thought her the loveliest woman in the world; then Lady Latimer would grow pale and sigh, and the shadow of great weariness would come over her face, and the shadow in her eyes would tell that something was missing in her life.

One morning—a lovely July morning—when to live and to breathe was a luxury in itself, the whole party had gone out together to look at some wonderful Gloire de Dijon roses; they were roses brought to the very highest point of perfection. I remember the groups round the tree discussing them. Lord Felton gathered one and gave it to his wife.

“The sweetest rose to the sweetest wife,” he whispered; but Lady Latimer and I both heard him.

I saw how suddenly she grew serious and lost her smiles,

and stood for some minutes in thoughtful silence, then drew my arm in hers, and we walked away together.

"Audrey," she said, "what a strange thing it must be for a husband to be in love with his wife like Lord Felton is! How strange, but how beautiful! Fancy living always with some one who loves you so well, who cares whether you are tired or not, whether you are happy or not, whether you are too cold or too warm; with some one who gives you sweet words and sweet flowers, who praises you, and kisses you, and can not live without you. How beautiful!"

"All husbands love their wives, do they not?" I asked, secure in my superior knowledge.

"No. Mine does not love me," she answered, quickly.

"I do not agree with you," I said. "Your husband must have loved you, or he would not have married you—he did not marry you for money; it must have been for love."

"But he never does anything of that kind. He has given me diamonds and pearls enough for a queen, but he never gave me a rose or whispered loving words to me. I do not know that I should be pleased if he did. I do not believe that Lord Felton ever forgets his wife for one moment; he is like her shadow."

I answered that it was impossible to expect from an old man like Lord Latimer the same attention and devotion as from a young one.

"If Lord Latimer were to behave as Lord Felton does," I added, "it would be as absurd as Cupid wearing a wig."

I repented the words the moment I had uttered them.

She smiled then, but she stood silent for a few minutes.

"Audrey," she said, suddenly, "I should have been much happier with a young husband—one who would have laughed, and talked, and sung with me, who would have given me flowers and kissed me. Do you not think so?"

"Yes," I answered, most decidedly; "but it is too late now to think of that."

"I know it is. It is very sad, after all," she continued, dreamily, "to have a husband so old and tired of life that he has forgotten all about love, and forgotten what it is like to be young, and forgotten what youth wants and desires."

"It is sad," I answered. "But, Lady Latimer, did you marry for love?"

I knew before I asked the question that it was not possible. She looked at me with the utmost surprise.

"I?" she said. "Oh, no, Audrey, I do not know that the word love was mentioned over my marriage at all."

"Then," I said, "you should not expect to receive that which you do not give."

She thought over the words for a few minutes, then she said:

"No, you are right, Audrey; but you must not think that I am complaining. I have not thought much about the matter, but since I have known Lord Felton I have thought to myself how very much better it is to have a young husband who loves you, than an old one who does not."

And I knew in my heart it was a great pity that she had found that out.

"I had never intended to speak of my marriage to any one," she said; "but I must tell you, Audrey; then you will understand; for I begin—ah, me!—I begin to understand what it is that I have missed in life. I have missed that which Lady Felton has found. I will tell you all about my marriage, Audrey," she continued. "I am a stranger here, and I came among you as Lady Latimer, of Lorton's Cray. No one knows who I am, or anything about me; most people suppose that I belong to some great family. My dear Audrey, I am a natural product of these troubled times. I am the daughter of a ruined gentleman farmer. Would you have guessed that?"

"I should never have guessed the word ruin to be connected with you in any way," I answered.

She laughed.

"It is true," she continued. "When I was a little girl, my father—Heaven bless him!—was considered a rich man. He rented a large farm called Fernhills, and his landlord was my husband, Lord Latimer.

"Time was when Fernhills was a small gold mine, when the fields were filled with golden grain, and the cattle were the finest in the county, when everything prospered, and my father was reckoned a rich man. He hunted and rode; he joined in all the sports; he was considered one of the most generous and hospitable men in it.

“My mother died when I was very little, and my father’s sister, Rose Clifford, kept house for us. Fernhills was a large, old-fashioned, comfortable house. We lived well; my father gave good dinners; my aunt Rose was on visiting terms with all the ladies in the neighborhood. We had a pretty little carriage and ponies. You know what kind of home it was, Audrey—no luxuries, no magnificence, but the ideal of warmth, comfort, and hospitality. Lord Latimer was our landlord; he owns almost half the county of Daleshire. He has a large mansion there, called Hillside Towers, but he seldom or never goes there. He owns hundreds of acres of land, and it is all let out in farms. Our farm, Fernhills, was by far the largest and best, and my father was on the way to moderate fortune, when all at once the bad seasons began. The floods came down and the meadows were flooded with water, the crops failed, the cattle died of disease. All my father’s savings had to be spent, and when they were gone he fell into debt. The rent of the farm was enormous, and the time came when he was called upon to pay it, with all arrears. Of course he could not comply. Bare, black, utter ruin stared him in the face. He was in despair; there seemed to be no help, no hope; everything must be sold, the dear old home broken up, and the world begun afresh—not a very bright prospect. I could not tell you my father’s grief. In those few days he grew thin and pale, the very ghost of his old kindly, genial self. It was pitiful to hear him. ‘I am a ruined man,’ he would say to me. ‘It is the forces of heaven and not of earth that are arrayed against me. It is the rain from the skies, the floods, the epidemics. I, who have had every comfort during my whole life long—I am ruined now.’ I would have given my life to have saved him, but I was powerless.

“Then a rumor spread in the county that Lord Latimer was coming to Hillside, and that he would be very generous to his tenants, and would return so much percentage of the rents paid; but my poor father was beyond that, he was so greatly in arrears. The end of it was, Lord Latimer came to Hillside Towers, and there was a grand meeting of all the tenantry. There were plenty of speeches and cheers; Lord Latimer was lauded to the skies. But my father came from it pale and trembling; he would have to sell all that he had in the world, and then leave

Fernhills. He said little, but he wore the look of a heart-broken man. He told me that on the day following, Lord Latimer was coming himself to look over Fernhills.

“Audrey, what happened was this: Lord Latimer came and fell in love with me. He was pleased to tell my father that I was the loveliest girl he had ever seen in his life, and that if I would be his wife, my father should not only have Fernhills for his life, but he would give him sufficient capital to repair all the damage done by the floods, and to restock the farm. That was the price paid for me, and when I come to think of it, it was very much like selling me.

“Neither my father nor aunt looked at it in that light. They thought such a piece of fortune perfectly magical; they never seemed to think there could be a possibility of my refusing. I do not know that I thought so myself. I do not remember that I made the least effort to save myself. I was blind; one thought only filled my mind, and it was that I should save my father. You see, there is no one to blame. My aunt thought that I was the happiest and most fortunate girl in the world; my father almost believed that the very powers of Heaven had interfered to save him from ruin; Lord Latimer said his visit to Hillside had been a very fortunate thing for him. There was no one to save me, and I had not the sense to save myself. I had been so happy in my simple home life that I had never thought or troubled about lovers or marriage; to live always at Fernhills with my father seemed to me the height of human happiness. I had not reached the knowledge then that I have now—that love is the crown of life, and that no life is complete without it.

“I know that, Audrey, now; I did not then. I make no complaint, but I think the three who were older and wiser, who knew more of life than I did, might have warned me, might have told me that I could not live without love. We were married quietly enough in the church at Hillside—Lord Latimer would not have any fuss—and directly the ceremony was over we went away to the Continent. We stayed there for a year and a half, then came home here to Lorton's Cray, and here I am, just beginning to understand the mysteries, the wants, the wishes, and the pains of human life.”

CHAPTER VI.

AFTER hearing that story, I understood; and while I loved Lady Latimer the better for it, it made me the more anxious over her.

It was so natural for her to long for some one who would be kind to her, who would give her flowers and whisper kind words to her; all young girls must have the same wish and desire. But what unutterable woe it would cause if she found this some one now! And in some vague way this fear became the shadow of my life. Not that there was any seeming cause for it. Lady Latimer was not in the least degree a flirt; she was far too spiritual and too earnest for that. Many visitors came to Lorton's Cray—some she admired, some she liked, some she talked with; but I never saw, on her part, the least approach to a flirtation, never a light look or word. At times, if it happened to her, as in the case of the Feltons, a young husband who was much in love with and very attentive to his wife, she would look wistfully at them, and she would say to me, "How happy a well-loved wife must be!" and my answer was always a very dry, brief "Yes."

I was as young as she herself, yet I saw the danger that lay before her, and she evidently did not. She missed something in her life, but she did not see breakers ahead in consequence of that miss, as I saw for her.

From that time there came into my love for her a sense of protection. Although there was no difference in our ages, I felt much more like her mother than anything else, the sense of responsibility was so great upon me.

The month of September came round, and with it a large company of guests. The shooting at Lorton's Cray was considered excellent. I remember the morning when Lord Latimer looked up from his letters with a growl of satisfaction.

"Lionel is coming," he said, "and he is bringing a friend with him, Colonel—Colonel—North. I wish he would write more plainly. Why, that must be the North who is heir at law to all the Dudley Gordon estates. They will be here to-morrow evening. I am glad that Philip North is coming."

Lady Latimer looked pleased and interested. Neither of us had a thought that the coming of these two visitors would be a turning-point in both our lives. I had thought much of the coming of Lionel Fleming. If it was possible for a human being to be in love with a picture, I was with his. I went to look at it every day, and every day admired it more. I desired greatly to see the original. I found myself often repeating his name—Lionel Fleming. I wondered if he had changed much; I wondered if he would talk to me, if he would be kind to me. The picture's eyes looked so true and so full of courage—would the real eyes look as pleasantly at me as they did? Quite suddenly all my questions were answered, all my wonder ended. There came an afternoon in September when the sunset was of extraordinary beauty. Lady Latimer asked me to go out on the lawn with her to watch it. It was a scene of most wonderful beauty; the whole of the western sky was aflame. Surely such colors were never mixed before; purple and gold, rose and amber, scarlet and blue—the most gorgeous of hues, the richest tints. The sun set over the river, and the water had caught and reflected all the wondrous colors.

“Did you ever see anything so lovely?” asked Lady Latimer; and as she spoke, coming as it were out of the lurid light the sunset threw upon the earth, we saw the figures of two men slowly approaching us. “That is Lionel Fleming,” cried Lady Latimer. The next minute they were with us.

I shall never forget the scene—the flaming evening sky, the richly colored water of the river, the strange light that brooded over the earth, the dark, handsome faces of the two men, their grand, athletic figures standing out in bold relief against the sky. I heard the few words of greeting between Lady Latimer and Lionel Fleming, and I heard the introduction of Colonel North; both gentlemen were introduced to me, and then it seemed all a dream.

I could fancy that the beautiful face in the picture had descended from the frame, and was near me in the strange evening light. The eyes that sought mine were as true and as brave, the same kingly head with its clusters of dark hair, the same beautiful mouth with its fine bold curves, the same broad shoulders and noble figure; but he, the real man, looked older than the picture.

Let me confess it: my heart went down before him. He had not been talking to me ten minutes before I thought to myself that there was no man like him, and that I would rather have even his most distant acquaintanceship than the love of any other. It was not that I was very romantic or easily won, but it seemed to me that I had known him long. It was my picture-lover come to life, and if it had not been for that picture, for my love and admiration of it, all would have been different; but I had dreamed of that face for long weeks, just as I had repeated the name.

No foolish ideas came to me. True, to my thinking he was a great hero, a great prince, as far above me as the stars are above the earth. I did not think to myself that I would try to charm him. No false notions entered my mind, but I confess humbly my heart went out to him. It seemed as though my life suddenly grew complete; a vague, delicious happiness took possession of me. None of this was shown in my manner. Lionel Fleming walked by my side and talked to me. I seemed to have gone away into fairy-land. I had forgotten the sunset and the river, Lady Latimer and the colonel. I had forgotten everything in the wide world, except Lionel Fleming. I did not even know what he was saying, and I answered him at random "yes" or "no."

The first thing that roused me was the sound of a laugh—a clear, beautiful, silvery laugh, with a ring of true enjoyment in it, such as I had never heard from the lips of Lady Latimer before. I turned to look at her; she was talking to Colonel North, and there was a brightness in her face new to me. Colonel North was a very handsome man; not like Lionel Fleming—no one could be like him. He was a fine, tall, soldierly man, with an erect, almost haughty bearing. He looked like what he was, a soldier and a gentleman. He had fine dark eyes and dark-brown hair; his features were handsome and distinguished; he had the air of one born to command. I noticed especially the strength and the whiteness of his hands. I liked him—no one could help it; he was always pleasant and kind to me. We walked slowly back to the house. I have never seen the sun set over the river without recalling every detail of that evening. We all four went into Lady Latimer's boudoir for a few minutes, where we took some tea.

—dinner was at eight—and still the strange feeling of something unreal was over me.

We had a delightful half hour, then Lionel Fleming went in search of Lord Latimer, Colonel North to his room, and Lady Latimer and myself went to her room.

“The dressing-bell has just rung,” she said. “Oh, Audrey, stay just five minutes, and tell me what dress to wear.”

And that was the first time since I had known her that Lady Latimer ever mentioned dress to me. I looked at her in wonder.

“I want to look nice to-night,” she said. “You see, we have a large dinner-party.”

On the previous evening the dinner-party had been even larger, and she had been perfectly indifferent over her dress, wearing exactly what her maid had prepared for her without comment.

I thought this interest in her toilet was an excellent sign, and in my wise fashion I tried to encourage it.

“I like you best in blue,” I said; “it suits your fair, rose-leaf complexion and golden hair; and of all textures, I prefer velvet. It takes such beautiful lights and shades; then pearls go best with blue velvet.”

“Thank you,” she said, cheerfully.

I was delighted when I saw how bright and interested she was. At dinner there was quite a change in her. All the weariness and fatigue had disappeared; her eyes were bright as stars. She was radiantly lovely, her voice had another ring, her laugh new music. It was the happiest dinner-party we had had at Lorton's Cray.

Colonel North was one of the best talkers I had ever heard; graphic, terse, entertaining, he completely enchanted us. He had read much; his thoughts and ideas were so vigorous, so noble. I saw Lady Latimer's eyes fixed on him, and when he had finished speaking, she drew a deep breath like one released from a spell. The gentlemen were not long before they followed us. As a rule, Lady Latimer did not exert herself much to entertain her guests, but to-night she was all fire and animation; she talked and laughed; she abandoned her accustomed place by the window and came to the piano. It turned out that Colonel North had a superb tenor voice.

Why a man so strong, tall, and vigorous should be a tenor instead of deep high bass was a puzzle to me.

Clear, deep, ringing, full of passion and music, I have heard no other voice like it. He sung one or two charming love songs, and I could not help thinking to myself that he could sing the heart from the breast of any woman. I saw Lady Latimer standing quite still near the piano, a faint flush on her face, her eyes fixed on him. He sung the lullaby of Whyte Melville, with its unequalled music and words:

“ Sleep, my love, sleep; rest, my love, rest,
Dieth the moan of the wind in the tree;
Foldeth her pinions the bird in her nest;
Sinketh the sun to his bed in the sea.
Sleep—sleep! lulled on my breast,
Tossing and troubled and thinking of me.

“ Hush, my love, hush! With petals that close,
Bowling and bending their heads to the lee,
Fainteth the lily and fadeth the rose,
Sighing and sad for desire of the tree.
Hush, hush! drooping like those,
Weary of waking and watching for me.

“ Peace, my love, peace! Falleth the night,
Veiling in shadows her glory for thee;
Eyes may be darkened, while visions are bright,
Senses be fettered, though fancy is free.
Peace, peace! Slumbering light,
Longing and loving, and dreaming of me.”

The last beautiful words died away, and I was startled by the expression of Lady Latimer's face. She looked as though she had awakened, as though some great and novel discovery had come to her. Her eyes wore a startled expression, her beautiful lips were parted. Startled, wondering, almost confused at her sudden awakening, she crossed the room and came to me. She clasped one of my hands in her own.

“ Audrey,” she said, “ that song has roused me from a long sleep. I know what I miss in my life, what I miss and others have; it is love;” and she looked at me with shining eyes. “ I did not know it before,” she continued. “ I know it now; it is love.”

CHAPTER VII.

It is not my own love story that I am writing; if it were, I should have to tell what a bewilderingly happy month this September was to me. I said to myself that I resembled one of those who worship sun, moon, and stars, yet never expect to get near them. I might have called my love story "The Romance of a Star;" I had just as much hope as though I loved one of the golden eyes of heaven and wished to win it—just as much. But I was unutterably happy. I did not look forward; I never asked myself what would happen when September ended; I never asked myself what I should do when he was gone. I lived in the present.

Captain Fleming was especially kind to me. I could not help noticing that he spent as much time with me as was possible. We met always at breakfast-time, and very often before. I liked the lawn in the early morning, I liked to watch the sunlight over the river, I liked the early song of the birds; and he had the same taste, so that we often met by the white gate where the syringa-trees stood and which led down to the river. We were always, I remember, equally surprised at meeting, and just a little shy.

At breakfast-time he generally secured a place near me. Then Lady Latimer, if the day were fine, would drive over to some appointed place and take lunch for the sportsmen. How many happy hours we spent in the woods and among the heather! Then would come dinner, and the long, happy, brilliant evenings. It was more than fairy-land, it was an earthly paradise. Of course, September would pass, and they would go, but no need to think of that now; let the glorious sun of the present shine on. There was a large party in the house, but though I knew them, knew who they were, and that much of the duty of entertaining them fell upon me, I was hardly conscious of their existence. I had eyes and ears only for the man who was so much like a picture just stepped from its frame. It was not my fancy—a new light came in his eyes when he looked at me, new tones in his voice when he spoke to me; but of course it meant nothing more than the sun means when it gives royal light and warmth to a flower.

He would be Lord Latimer some day, master of Lorton's Cray and all its broad lands; he would marry some one in his own sphere, some great lady with gold and lands of her own, and then—

Let me be happy while I could; it is not every one who secures one month of perfect bliss from a life-time. I did.

When the mists of happiness and love, wonder and delight, began to clear from my own brow, I perceived a great change in Lady Latimer. All the weariness that had lain over her young beauty like a shadow had vanished; she was simply radiant, her eyes bright as stars, her face flushed with the fairest tints of health. I could have fancied that even the sheen of her golden hair had grown deeper. She who had been so listless that nothing interested her, went about now with sweet snatches of song and sweet smiles on her lips, interested in everything, full of grace, of vigor, and of kindness. She was most patient and forbearing with Lord Latimer; she seemed to live and move in an atmosphere of perfect gladness and content. At first I did not see or understand; afterward I knew well enough what was the cause.

"I never knew before," she said to me, one morning, "what a lovely month September is. The red and gold, the russet brown and deep crimson of the trees, are even more beautiful than their green leaves; and I like September flowers better than those which come in spring; there is nothing so lovely as the white chrysanthemum."

Poor child! I knew afterward why she found September the fairest of months. Again, we had driven one noon to Ashton Firs, taking with us luncheon for the sportsmen. We stood for some minutes watching the sunlight on the valley, and the blue haze on the distant hills. She turned to me suddenly, her eyes filled with tears.

"Oh, Audrey," she said, "what a beautiful world it is! I never knew until now. I seem to have slept through my life, and to be just awakening. Do you see the green on the grass and the lovely blue of the sky? Why, Audrey, I never knew how much music there was in a bird's song, I never knew what the brook sung about, or the winds told to the trees, until now."

Ah, my dear, my dear! neither you nor I was wise enough to know what was teaching you.

One evening—it was the month of September, and the

harvest moon was shining bright as day in the midst of a dark-blue sky—the gentlemen sat longer than usual over their wine. The night was warm and pleasant.

“Audrey,” said Lady Latimer, “let us go as far as the white gate just to look at the river.”

I wrapped a black lace shawl round her golden head and white shoulders, and we went out together, leaving the shining lights that streamed from the great windows, and the dim, soft shadow of the old house behind us, down past the lime-trees, to the white gate that was canopied with trees.

“Open it, Audrey, and let us go down to the water’s edge,” said Lady Latimer.

We went, and I remember, as though it were yesterday, our shadows on the long grass, and the wooing sigh of the wind in the fast-dying lime-leaves.

The moon shone full over the river, every wavelet seemed to catch a ray of silvery light; the sight was beautiful as fairy-land. Lady Latimer stood silent for some minutes; then, in a low, soft voice she began the lines:

“ I passed without the city gate,
I lingered by the way,
The palm was bending to her mate,
And thus I heard her say:

“ “ The arrow to the quiver,
And the wild bird to the tree;
The stream to meet the river,
And the river to the sea.
The waves are wedded on the beach,
The shadows on the lea;
And like to like—and each to each,
And I—to thee.

“ “ The cedar on the mountain,
And the bramble in the brake;
The willow by the fountain,
And the lily by the lake;
The serpent coiling in its lair,
The eagle soaring free,
Draw kin to kin, and pair to pair,
And I—to thee.’

“ The palm was bending to her mate,
I marked her meaning well;
And passed within the city gate,
The old fond tale to tell.”

"I can remember, Audrey," she said, "when I read those lines, and they were so much Greek to me. Now I understand them perfectly. They mean that every one must have love, that like will seek like, that the young seek youth, the beautiful seek others as fair. Everything in nature loves, even to the butterfly who loves the blue-bell, and the bee which is betrothed to the bloom; and if flowers and birds, bees and butterflies, all love, how much more we— I think—nay, I am sure, that I have been blind all my life until now."

"And what has given light and sight to your eyes now?" I asked.

I could not resist the question, although I knew it would have been so much better left alone; but she looked at me with calm, sweet eyes.

"I do not know," she answered. "It seems to me that the eyes of my soul are just open, and that they see infinite light—infinite brightness. Ah me!"

I knew, though she did not, what had taught her, and my heart went out to her in great loving pity. She went on, a perfect rapture of happiness shining in her face.

"Even the moonlight is different to me. I thought it cold and capricious. Now I see the light is tender and full of poetry; now I see—"

But the words were never finished. Quite suddenly the white gate opened, and we heard a voice that made my heart beat, say:

"You are here, Lady Latimer. Philip said you would be here by the river."

Ah me! the light on her face—the tender, beautiful blush—the rapt expression when she turned to Colonel North, and said, with a smile:

"How did you know that I should be here?"

"I felt quite sure of it. You love the moonlight, and you love the river. When we found the drawing-room empty, I said to Lionel, 'Lady Latimer and Miss Lovel have gone to look at the moonlight.'"

"I, of course," interrupted Lionel, "said at once, 'Let us find them.' And we have found you."

There was one moment of delicious silence, when it seemed to me that the very moonlight throbbed and thrilled on the air.

"We need not hurry in," said Colonel North. "Several of them are coming. A stroll by the river on this moonlit night will be much better than sitting in a drawing-room by the light of lamps."

Then came half an hour that was like time stolen from Paradise. It seemed quite natural that Captain Fleming should walk by my side, even more natural than Colonel North should walk with Lady Latimer. Others joined us, but no one broke up these little groups; no one came to me, no one joined Lady Latimer.

We talked about everything bright and beautiful; of the river that rolled on to the sea, of the moon that shone in the sky, of the wind whose whispers were those of a lover among the leaves. Then I perceived that Colonel North and Lady Latimer were standing by the rustic bridge which spanned the river. The black lace shawl had fallen, leaving her golden head bare, and her lovely face all washed by the moonlight. She looked wondrously fair. Captain Fleming was looking at them.

"What a beautiful pair they would make," he said, suddenly. "Colonel North is my ideal of a soldier, and Lady Latimer is one of the fairest of women."

Indeed, the dark, soldierly face and figure showed to great advantage by the side of the fair and radiant woman.

We remained out-of-doors nearly an hour. I went with Captain Fleming to the square of fountains. They were indescribably beautiful under the light of the harvest moon, and I am afraid we forgot every one else. I did. It was the night of nights to me. But when we came back to the drawing-room, Lady Latimer was there. The beautiful tenor voice of Colonel North was ringing through the room, and she stood by the window listening, with a dreamy smile on her fair face, and these were the words that he sung:

"Not much I sought, I had my dream—
Dear love, your very words I quote—
A rose, the ripple of a stream,
A blue sky and a boat.

"But roses fade as roses blow,
And summer skies can lower and frown;
The stream runs deep and dark, and so
This boat of ours went down."

She smiled as she listened to the words, then, lightly touching a yellow rose that she wore on her breast, she said:

“Roses fade as roses blow, but this one will never die.”

“Who gave it to you?” I asked.

“Colonel North,” she answered; and I saw all heaven in her face as she uttered the words. Then, ah me!—then I knew all.

CHAPTER VIII.

I THEN knew all. I knew that she had found the something missing in her life, that she had learned what the birds sung about and the wind whispered to blossom and leaf, what the waves said when they broke on the shore. She had learned the great secret of life, which was love; but she did not know it—ah! thank God for that.

She would not have looked so happy, so bright, so innocent, if she had known what had happened to herself. She did not know; that was my chief cause for gratitude. The knowledge might come to her, but it had not done so yet, and I vowed to myself that if I could I would guard her from it. She had entered fairy-land, but she was all unconscious that she had passed the golden gate. She had listened to the songs of Paradise, but she did not know they had sounded in her ears. She had drunk of the chalice which is all foam, and she had not recognized its flavor. She saw suddenly, and as she had never seen it before, all the beauty and brightness of the world, but she did not know what had opened her eyes. I prayed Heaven she never might.

She was so innocently happy, the expression of her face was one of glad content; even Lord Latimer noticed it at last.

“It seems to me, Grace,” he said to her one morning, “that you have grown better-looking.”

I thought to myself, “Oh, blind of eyes, blind of heart, not to understand.” Surely, any one who loved her might have seen the danger she was in; so young, so fair, with such a passionate, loving heart, and left entirely to her own resources—for Lord Latimer spent very little time with his guests. He had grown older and more feeble lately, and as life slipped away and he lost his grasp of its

pleasures, he grew morose and more stern. He liked Lionel Fleming, and he spent a great deal of time in talking to him; but he never went out with the sportsmen, he never joined the luncheon-parties. He dined every evening with his guests, but he never appeared in the drawing-room after dinner. She was left, then, to herself, to the influence of the sweet, sad music and the harvest moon. There was no one to say, "Do not let Colonel North sing your heart away;" no one to say, "Do not go out every evening while the harvest moon is shining;" no one seemed to notice anything but me. Lady Latimer was mistress of the house, Colonel North the most important guest in it. It was natural that he should walk and ride by her side, that he should be her escort, that he should make her the especial object of his attentions; but it was not natural that he should look at her, when he was singing, with his whole heart in his eyes, and that every night, while the harvest moon was shining, he should ask her to go down and look at the river with him; nor was it quite natural that he should gather all the flowers she wore, and talk so much poetry to her. I thought often of her simple words to me, "How nice it must be to have some one to say loving words to you and bring you nice flowers!" She had both now—flowers and words.

I tried my best to take care of her. I often sacrificed the time I might have spent with Captain Fleming in sitting beside her, trying to take some little of her attention from Colonel North. I might as well have tried to fly over the moon; but, thank Heaven! no one saw it except me.

The boys loved Colonel North. He was their *beau-idéal* of a soldier, a gentleman, and a "man who had no nonsense about him," which was Bob's favorite description of him. Give them half an hour with the colonel, and they were quite happy. "He knows how to treat a boy; there is no make-believe about him," they said. To my wonder, astonishment, imagination, and dismay, they preferred him to the heir of Lorton's Cray. They all wanted to be "tall as the colonel, handsome as the colonel, and just as upright." In fact, the colonel was the hero of the hour. Captain Fleming came next, but, as Bob irreverently phrased it, he was not "real jam."

During this happy month of September, Lord Latimer

did not forget my father and mother. Every day there was a dispatch of game from the hall to the vicarage, and every week, at least, they joined us at dinner. They saw nothing of what troubled me so greatly; my sweet mother would not have understood such a thing. They considered Colonel North a king among men—so brave, so gallant, so courteous; they quoted him and admired him. He was a Chevalier Bayard in their eyes, but they preferred Captain Fleming.

One night, when they dined at Lorton's Cray, I sat next to Captain Fleming at dinner. We talked, as usual, laughed and amused ourselves; a rose that I had been wearing was transplanted to the button-hole of his coat. After dinner he talked to me again. We had dancing that evening, and he danced with me. I am not quite sure whether I remembered the existence of any other person. When the evening ended, I saw an expression of anxiety on my mother's face. She called me to her side in the great entrance hall, and, raising her face to mine, she looked straight into my eyes.

"Audrey," she said, "for the first time in my life I am anxious over you. I am not quite sure if I have done a wise thing in letting you come to live here. My dear, the heir of Lorton's Cray is a very handsome young man."

"He is as good and brave as he is handsome, mother," I replied.

Her face cleared a little; this open praise disarmed her.

"He seems to like talking to you, Audrey," she continued; "but, of course, my dear child, you always bear in mind the difference in your positions. You have too much sense, Audrey, to let your mind get filled with absurd ideas. I—I should not like you to be made unhappy because I am not here to look after you; it would embitter my whole life."

I smiled. I had never hoped, I had never thought of hope, so that I could safely look in my mother's face and smile.

I took her to the great hall window, whence we could see the stars shining in the sky. I pointed to the brightest and the largest.

"Do you see that star, mother?" I asked.

"Yes," she answered.

"I should sooner think of asking it to come down from

heaven to me than of filling my mind with foolish ideas about Captain Fleming."

In spite of myself my lips quivered as I uttered his name, but my mother did not notice it. I did not distress her by crying out the truth—that I had been willing to barter the happiness of my whole life for one month's bliss; it would have broken her heart. I told her no untruth, I did not even deceive her, for I had never dreamed of any return for my great love. I never misunderstood his kindness or his gay, chivalrous fashion. It would soon be over now; no need to break my mother's heart as well as my own.

The beautiful month was drawing to an end, but before any of us had begun to realize what the parting would be like, Lord Latimer introduced a new feature. One day, just before dinner, Captain Fleming had gone into the library to speak to him. Colonel North followed. Business of some kind took Lady Latimer and myself there; we had a lively conversation; the old lord seemed pleased and cheered.

"I consider," he said, "that this shooting-party has been a great success. Lionel, you must come back at Christmas—come for some weeks, and help Lady Latimer with her charades and plays. Come with him, Colonel North."

I saw the colonel look first at Lady Latimer. Her beautiful eyes smiled upon him.

"I shall be only too delighted," he replied; and that was how it happened that parting lost its pain.

Little matter that they left when September was over if they returned for Christmas. When the end came, and the day dawned on which they left Lorton's Cray, it was with smiles, not tears, we saw them ride away. A few weeks, only a few, and they returned for even a longer stay.

It was a strange calm after they had gone. We were not unhappy or dull; a new order of things set in. We were always thinking of and preparing for Christmas and the New Year.

"We will have such a Christmas as has never been celebrated in England before," said Lady Latimer to me. "We will have the old banqueting-hall made into a theater; we will have charades, masquerades, and theatri-

cals; we will dance and sing. When it is frosty, we will skate. When the snow falls and the wind wails, we will tell ghost tales. Oh, Audrey, how happy we shall be!"

And she whose beautiful face had once expressed all the weariness that life could hold, caught me in her arms and waltzed round the room with me.

It was both pitiful and touching. She thought of nothing, talked of nothing but Christmas; everything referred to Christmas; there was no looking beyond it. If a beautiful costume was sent from London or Paris, it was reserved for Christmas.

"I think the end of the world will come at Christmas, Lady Latimer," I said. "We are making such preparations for it."

She laughed gayly. She was always laughing now, and a sweet, glad content rested on her fair face.

"I never knew before," she cried, "what a happy time Christmas was, Audrey;" and then her face flushed crimson. "We used to hang up what we called 'a kissing bunch' at home."

"So did we," I answered, and my face grew even redder than hers.

"I—I suppose," she said, after a time, "that we could not do such a thing here at Lorton's Cray. It seems to me, Audrey, the grander a house is, the more miserable it is. Think of the merriment in your house at Christmas. But we shall be happy. What do you think of a kissing bunch?"

"If we have one at all," I answered, discreetly, "it must be called a mistletoe bough."

"Well, what do you think of a mistletoe bough?" she asked.

I thought it delightful, and told her so.

Then she drew nearer to me. She took my arms, and laid them round her neck.

"Audrey," she whispered, "if we have a mistletoe bough, will any one kiss us, do you think—you and me?"

"Lord Latimer may," I answered, dryly.

"Any one else?" she asked. But I would not smile.

"I know some people so lovable," she said, "that to stand under the mistletoe for two minutes with them would atone for years of unhappiness."

“I am sorry that I do not know any one of that description,” I answered. I was always careful—always discreet.

But, for all that, when the orders were given for the Christmas evergreens, there was a large one for mistletoe.

CHAPTER IX.

EVERY day Christmas came nearer and nearer—every day the face of beautiful Lady Latimer grew fairer and younger, more bright and more radiant—every day she woke up with fresh plans and fresh designs—every day she found some new beauty, some new happiness in the coming Christmas-tide. And all this because she had learned to love Colonel North without knowing it. At last Christmas came, and brought them both with it.

The snow and the biting frost had come, the ice was inches thick on the deep meres and pools round Lorton's Cray, and Lorton's Cray itself was a scene of merriment and festivity. A large Christmas party was gathered under its roof.

Lady Latimer was one of the most charming of hostesses. Lord Latimer took very little part in it; he dined, as usual, with his guests, and then retired. He never came to the drawing-room, but once or twice had made his way to the billiard-room.

I may have been prejudiced, but to me he seemed more morose and more stern than ever. It may be that it angered him to see youth and merriment all round him, yet not be able to share in it.

There was nothing to mar the happiness. If Lord Latimer heard the sounds of music, dancing, and song, he made no comments, and the old walls rocked again with Christmas fun and merriment. Our boys shared it. Lady Latimer never left them out, when it was practicable to have them there.

They were at most of the skating-parties, and caused unlimited fun. I noticed one thing, and admired their good sense; they had entirely ceased to advise me over marrying, and were content to take things as they were.

The dear boys! I can see them now on the ice, with great red worsted comforters, and hands perfectly blue with cold, yet happy as kings. They saw nothing of the shadow

that hung over Lorton's Cray, but I did, and I was powerless to prevent it.

I can not tell exactly how I saw it deepen, but the time came when I could think of nothing else. I placed my own love story aside to devote myself to her. I can not tell either when I first grew alarmed, and began to watch other people, to see if they were watching her. But no, the world went on its way rejoicing, and no one saw that a soul was in danger but myself—unconsciously so; that I shall always maintain—nevertheless, in peril so great that the very angels in heaven looked on in pity.

The first time that I was alarmed was one lovely frosty morning when the sun shone on the snow, and the hoarfrost had silvered the trees and hedges, and the icicles hung like huge diamonds. A walk through Lorton Woods had been proposed, and when we were all ready to start, Colonel North was absent. I shall never forget Lady Latimer's face—all the brightness died from it, all the animation vanished. It was plain enough to be seen that the walk had lost all its interest for her.

"It is bitterly cold," she said to me, with a shudder. "I am not at all sure whether we are wise in going."

Quite suddenly he came upon us; he had been to the stable to give some directions about his horses. No need to speak. I turned aside with a groan. If all heaven had been suddenly opened to her, she could not have looked more delighted; her very soul seemed to shine in her eyes as they rested on him.

"I though we had lost you," she said.

He took her arm in his, and with laughing gallantry, said:

"You may lose your memory, Lady Latimer, but you will never lose me." And though he laughed, I knew the words were true.

They went off together, forgetting all the world. Ah me! And I, who loved her better than I loved my life, stood by, powerless to help her. But the truth was apparent; she had learned to love Colonel North—unconsciously, I know—and he loved her. I was as young as herself, but it seemed to me that the entire responsibility of her rested on my shoulders.

What should I do? I could not go to the old lord and say, "Rouse yourself; the beautiful young child whom

you have made your wife is in deadly peril. She married you without love, and she has learned, unconsciously, what love is since then. Save her, for she is in mortal peril." Heaven only knows what would happen; he was not that kind of man. Some men would have been noble, tolerant, generous—would have helped her out of the danger; not Lord Latimer; there was very little nobility of soul about him. If I had gone to her and said, "My dear, you are in deadly danger; you are married to a man older than your father, whom you do not love, and you have found one whom you do love," I might, by suddenly opening her eyes, do far more harm than good, and she might do something desperate in her despair. The only thing that seemed left for me to do was to watch over her with devoted care and love.

More than once it occurred to me to speak to the colonel, but it was a delicate and dangerous thing to do. I am quite sure that at first he had no thought of harm. Her beauty attracted him, and her genuine delight in his society urged him on, until the spell of passion lay upon both—and the passion of love is a terrible one. The shadow grew deeper and darker to my eyes, although no one else saw it. They were seldom apart now. When breakfast was over he was her companion in all walks and drives; they spent the afternoon together, either at the piano or with books; when twilight fell and it was too dark to read, too light for the lamps, they would be found in the conservatory talking, always talking, with the same earnest look on each beautiful face. Many a time I have gone in search of her and found her standing in the dim light by his side, her face all shining, and I have come away praying, "Dear Heaven, help her, or she is lost!" At night she was queen of the revels, and he was king; they danced together, they sung together, and when those two exquisite voices went floating through the room in one grand unison, I knew how their souls went together also. A Christmas revel, a New Year's festivity, but for them a something which I began to fear would have no ending. The worst symptom, to my mind, was that she never spoke of him to me. If his name was mentioned in his absence, the color would rise and seem to burn her face. I tried my best; but what was an inexperienced girl of eighteen against two people passionately in love?

There were times when I longed to tell Captain Fleming of the deadly peril so close at hand, and beg of him to induce his friend to go away; but my courage failed me when I would have made the effort—I could not utter the words.

One night—it was the winter gloaming, if there be such a time; the lamps were not lighted, and the rooms were all brilliant with the red glow of the fire-light and odorous with flowers, so warm, so luxurious; the visitors were dispersed over the house, some in the billiard-room, some in the music-room. I went to her boudoir in search of Lady Latimer. I had always been accustomed to enter the room without rapping at the door. I did so now.

I turned the handle gently and went in. They were standing together before the fire, the lamps were not lighted, and the ruddy glow of the fire filled the room. Their faces were turned to the fire; they neither saw nor heard me; his hand rested lightly on her shoulder, and they were talking so earnestly. I went back quietly as I came, but with a sword in my heart, for her sake. I waited for one minute, then announced my arrival by calling, “Lady Latimer, are you here?”

“I am here, dear Audrey; come in,” was the answer.

But when I went in they stood together no longer; he was at the window, and she at the table. My very heart sunk when I saw the happiness on her face.

The charade-parties were a great success; so were the plays. It seemed wonderful to me that no one else remarked how Lady Latimer and Colonel North always took the part of lovers; stranger still, that no one saw how naturally they assumed it, how, in playing a love scene, it was so natural for him to throw his arm round the beautiful figure that seemed to sway at his least touch, how he kissed with passion the white hand that he clasped.

Could I alone, out of the whole world, see, or was every one else blind?

So the shadow deepened and darkened. I was unutterably miserable; I began to live in constant fear. It seemed to me there was a volcano beneath my feet.

No shadow of fear lay on Lady Latimer's face. I shall never know now whether she realized the danger and ignored it, or whether she was ignorant of it, until the end came suddenly. It had been arranged that on New Year's

Eve a grand ball should be given. The entertainment was called a ball, but it was to comprise charades, music, cards, and everything else that was enjoyable. Lady Latimer and Colonel North had drawn out a programme that was most inviting; to my thinking, they spent a great deal of time over it, but it was certainly a success. I remember every detail of that New Year's Eve—how beautiful the frozen snow looked in the sunshine, how white and hard the ice was, how the scarlet berries of the holly-tree glowed, how the robin-redbreasts flew. A beautiful New Year's Eve, on which, ah me! I alone saw the shadow. I confess Lady Latimer looked lovely enough that night to make any man lose both heart and head. She had chosen a costume worn generally by those who represent Juliet on the stage; blue velvet over white satin, with what looked like a net-work or armor of pearls; her white shoulders and arms shone through the pearls, her face wore a dainty flush, her eyes were bright. Ah me! ah me!

I forgot all about myself; my heart was heavy over her. I could not divest myself of a fear, a foreboding that something was to happen that night. A presentiment of coming evil seemed to weigh me down. Captain Fleming said to me more than once, "You look tired and ill, Miss Lovel;" but I could not answer him. I had no heart—no heart.

It did not surprise me that they danced together, and more than one remarked that they were the handsomest pair in the room; nor was I surprised that, instead of dancing together a second time, they went into the conservatory, nor when they walked up and down the picture-gallery, nor when they paused for a few moments under the mistletoe bough and I saw him kiss her; but I was surprised when I heard him say to her:

"You need have no fear; I have made every arrangement. The carriage will be at the turn of the road by two o'clock. All will be well."

They neither saw nor heard me; they were sitting behind a group of white camellias, tall trees with glossy green leaves, and I was on the other side, hovering near her, always fearful, yet without knowing why. Lady Latimer made some remark that I did not hear. His answer was:

"Trust to me, my darling; all will be well."

I turned away sick at heart, and from the depths of my soul I prayed Heaven to save her, for she was in deadly peril.

Still the real significance of those words did not occur to me. "The carriage will be at the turn of the road by two o'clock." I thought it was some arrangement about driving the next day, and I said to myself, over and over again, that I must do something to help her, something to save her, or she would be lost. Little did I dream, even then, of what that New Year would bring forth.

CHAPTER X.

How, or how suddenly, I missed her, I can not tell. Whenever Lady Latimer quitted a room she seemed to take some of the brightness away with her. I missed the shining of the pearls and the light gleaming on the blue velvet. How long she had been gone from the ball-room I could not tell. None of my family was there that evening. New Year's Eve was a sacred festivity at the vicarage. My father always saw the Old Year die and the New Year born on his knees. There was no one to whom I could speak or tell my fears.

Where was she—the beautiful, radiant, graceful woman who had given light and brightness even to that bright room? Not with Colonel North, that was one comfort, for he stood at the end of the ball-room, talking to some ladies; but when I came to watch his face, it was unlike itself, there was a strange expression on it, as though he were waiting, and waiting impatiently. I saw restraint and constraint upon his face. My fears grew.

I went to the conservatory, to the picture-gallery, to every place where I had last seen the jewels shine, but there was no trace of Lady Latimer. Then I went back to the ball-room and found that Colonel North had gone too.

I shall always think that which followed was an inspiration from Heaven. I looked at one of the jeweled clocks that stood in the anteroom; it had turned half past one, and the words spoken by Colonel North came plainly to me:

"The carriage will be at the turn of the road by two o'clock."

Oh, God! did it mean that? I stood for a minute paralyzed; my heart almost ceased beating, the blood ran cold in my veins, my limbs trembled. Could it mean that?

Quick as thought, I went to Lady Latimer's room. There was nothing unusual at first sight, but when I opened the wardrobe door, I saw the blue velvet and pearls hastily thrust inside. I knew—I knew she had gone away with him, and they had chosen the night because they imagined during the excitement they would not be missed. Two o'clock, at the corner of the road! I knew the turning well; a great oak-tree stood there; we had often rested under its shade. Should I have time to reach it and to save her? Quick as thought, I took a cloak and hat from her wardrobe. I did not stop to think; I knew, in the confusion, no one would notice me or miss me. I flew down the great staircase, across the entrance hall, meeting no one; then I reached the great hall door, and stood outside, trying for one moment to think which was the nearest way. If I could only reach the corner of the road before the carriage started, I was all right. I should save her, even if I lost my life in doing it. If the carriage had gone, then eternal shame and disgrace must be the lot of the beautiful woman I loved. The moon was shining, but not very brightly, and the stars were out; the snow gleamed white and hard on the ground, the tall trees, with their bare branches, stood like giants. I looked neither to the right nor the left; I ran as though for dear life, praying Heaven, even as I ran, to save her—save her from eternal shame and woe. On, past the shining laurels and the tall firs; on, past the frozen lake, past the lime-trees, past the holly-bushes gleaming crimson, past the tall larches through which the winter wind moaned and wailed; hastening, despairing, crying to Heaven to help me to save her; and then—oh, God be praised and thanked!—I saw them. They had not reached the park gates, and she was saved; for he should not take her away unless he killed me first; I would cling to her—save her in some way. They were walking quickly, but the next moment I was with them, by her side. I cried out her name, I flung my arms round her. “My darling, you must not, you shall not go!” and then I stood for one moment breathless. Which should I speak to? What should I say?

“I know,” I cried, at last. “The carriage is waiting

at the turn of the road, and you—oh, Colonel North, gentleman and soldier—you want to take her away with you to eternal shame and eternal remorse! You shall not!”

“What, in Heaven’s name, brings you here, Audrey Lovel?” cried Colonel North.

And I answered, “Heaven itself, to save her from ruin and death. You shall not take her away; we are close to the lodge gates, and if you try to pass them and take her with you, I will raise such an alarm that you will be overtaken in five minutes, and she shall be dragged from you by force. Gentleman and soldier! Do you know that you are coward and thief in stealing another man’s wife?”

He drew back. I went on:

“The wife of an old man powerless to avenge himself—a man who has trusted you, whose bread you have eaten, under whose roof you have found hospitable shelter. And you repay him by stealing his wife! Why did you not steal that which he values less—his gold or his jewels? Oh, shame—bitter, endless shame on you!”

And it seemed to me that the wind took up the words and re-echoed them among the trees, “shame—bitter, endless shame!” I turned to the trembling girl.

“Come back with me, my darling,” I said, “come back. It is only a bad, evil, black dream; come back with me; no one shall know.”

She hesitated, she half clung to him. I saw him throw his arm round her, and I saw defiance in his face.

“Lady Latimer,” I said, “do you know where those gates lead? Look at them, and know the road leading from them is the path to hell.” A low moan came from her lips. “Think,” I said; “it is not just now, while the glamour of love lies on you; it is not the present, it is the long years of the future, when the glamour will fall from your eyes, and you will remember nothing but the wickedness of your sin. Wicked love never lasts long, and the love of the man who would brand you with endless shame is wicked, weak, and cruel. Think of the long years of shame and sorrow and endless remorse! Come back with me, darling!”

“You mean well, Miss Lovel,” said Colonel North, “but if you have any heart in your breast, you will not ask her to go back. I maintain that she is not married—

marriage means a union of hearts, it means two souls made one."

"Marriage means the vows taken before God and man, which can never be broken," I cried.

"How can you ask her," he continued, "to go back to that loveless, cheerless, miserable life?"

"It is her way to heaven," I said.

"I will make a heaven on earth for her," he cried.

"You can not," I answered; "and if you try to do it, you will lose her both worlds. Oh, my darling, come back with me! Never mind the misery, never mind the pain. It is all as nothing compared to what you will and must suffer if you go with him. Come back, dear."

Then she spoke to me.

"Audrey, let me go," she said. "I know it is all true, but—oh! do not turn away from me—I prefer to suffer with him. I prefer sorrow and repentance with him to my gilded misery without him. Let me go, dear; I could not live without him; let me go."

"Let her go, Miss Lovel," said Colonel North, in a tone of deep emotion. "You mean well, you are very good. But she could never be happy there again—never again."

"And I love him, Audrey; that shall be my religion—love. You know what I have missed in my life, and now I have found it. I love him; let me go, Audrey; love is best."

"No, it is not!" I cried—"it is not best, not such love as this. Fear of God and love of duty are best. Oh, Lady Latimer, you can not pass those gates, an angel bars the way!"

"She shall go!" said Colonel North, in a low, resolute voice. "Unclasp your arms, Miss Lovel. I have won her by right of love; she is mine, and I shall take her!"

I tightened my clasp on the trembling figure.

"She belongs to Lord Latimer," I said, "and while he lives no man shall take her from him."

She flung her arms round my neck, and cried to me:

"Let me go, Audrey; I can not return; let me go with him—I love him—I love him!"

"No," I answered; "you are not strong enough to save yourself, but I am strong enough to save you. Unless you, Colonel North, strike me down dead, you shall not take her."

"I do not kill women," said Colonel North.

"You do worse," I cried; "you ruin their souls. You pretend that you love this poor child; you would be kinder far, braver far, if you plunged a dagger in her heart, than take her away with you. The murder of a body is little compared to the murder of a soul."

He started as though my words had shot him; his hands fell from her. I threw my arms round her and drew her closer to me.

"There is no time to lose," I said. "If you take one, you take both; if you take Lady Latimer, you take me; I will not loose my hold on her until she is safe from you. I repeat, there is no time to lose. You do not fear my words; I shall give a cry that will soon bring help to us."

"No, no!" he cried, hastily.

But I did. I wonder now that I had the nerve. I gave a long, low cry, and the next minute we saw a light in one of the windows of the lodge.

"Look," I said, "we shall have help soon."

"Go, Philip," said Lady Latimer; "go, there is no help for us."

"I could curse you for your cruel work!" he said.

"You will bless me some time," I answered.

"Let me say good-bye to you, Philip," cried Lady Latimer, and her voice was full of anguish. "Ah, my love, my love, found so late, and lost forever!"

He took her in his arms—I could hardly keep back my tears—he kissed her face, her eyes, her lips. She sobbed the while as though her heart would break. I heard him whisper good-bye, and I heard him say, "It was the hand of Heaven;" then, with an effort that seemed to rend his soul from his body, he turned away.

"One word, Colonel North," I said. "I will keep your secret, but it must be on my own terms. You must leave the house to-morrow morning under the pretext that you have received a telegram, and you must swear to me that you will never return. If you do so, I shall at once tell Lord Latimer all that has passed."

He bowed; he could not speak; and as he turned away from me I saw the tears rain down his face. Then we had to draw back and stand in silence under the dark shade of the trees, for the lodge-keeper came out, lantern in hand, followed by his wife.

"I am sure I heard voices," he said.

"I am sure I heard a cry," she replied.

They looked about for some time, then went in-doors again.

I could not help his turning back and taking Lady Latimer in his arms again.

One quick, passionate embrace, and he was gone. I led her home. She did not weep, but from her lips came a low, soft moan.

Never mind if she died of it; I had saved her from worse than death.

We spoke no word until we reached the house. I knew we must run some risk.

"We will go in at the side door, and avoid the grand staircase," I said. "Then I will get you to your room."

She made no answer.

The mad, merry music of a waltz was sounding as we entered the house. Everything seemed just as we had left it, and with great care and caution, lest we should be seen or heard, I led her to her room. She stood like a beautiful white statue, as cold and as dead.

"Lady Latimer," I said, "you have still yourself to save. You must make an effort. Can you hear me? Can you see me? You must make one effort more, and save yourself. Remember those lines—

"Don't tell me of to-morrow;
There is much to do to-day,
That can never be accomplish'd
If we throw the hours away!
Every moment has its duty,
Who the future can foretell?
Then why defer to-morrow
What to-day can do as well?"

Quickly as loving, trembling hands could work, I took from her the black dress, the cloak, and bonnet in which she was going to travel. I put them out of sight, and then I brought back the blue velvet and pearls. She cried out at the sight of it, and waved it from her.

"You must put it on," I said.

"I can not," she replied. "I would rather wear a shroud."

"You must," I said. "You must put it on. You must color your face and brighten your hair. You must

come down-stairs and show yourself in the ball-room. Remember that you have yourself to save."

"I—I can not," she cried, in despairing tones.

"You must," I repeated. "You must do it to save yourself, even should you die directly afterward."

My strong will beat down her weaker one. I dressed her. I tried my best to make her look as she had done before, but it was as though I had tried to dress a dead woman. Then I fetched some brandy for her, and made her drink it.

A faint tinge of color came to her lips. She looked at me once with wild eyes.

"I hate you!" she said; and the words were like a hiss.

"Never mind," I answered, "if you can only save yourself."

I found her a large bouquet of fresh flowers, and told her to hold it before her face when she passed through the ball-room, so as to hide her colorless face. She did so; but when the time came for her to return to the ball-room she could not walk.

"You must absolutely go," I said. "It is the only means of saving yourself. If ever the incidents of this night should be known, no one will believe one word if you are seen in the ball-room. You must go."

She went, leaning on my arm. I shall never forget the ordeal. She clutched my arm. I felt how she trembled. I feared, if any one spoke to her, that she would suddenly collapse and fall on the ground. She would have done so, but, fortunately, no one came near us.

CHAPTER XI.

WE walked slowly through the ball-room twice. I led her, as though she were blind and dumb, through the conservatory and the picture-gallery; I was determined that every visitor should see her. If by any mischance it was rumored that she had been seen in the park after one o'clock at night, a hundred voices would be raised in contradiction, for a hundred people and more saw her in her own house.

It was a ghostly walk. More than once I thought she would fall from my arm dead, but at last I placed her safely in her own room again, and rang for her maid.

"Lady Latimer is tired out," I said; "she is completely exhausted. Get something for her, and let her go to rest."

The maid looked frightened at the white, set face.

"You look very ill, my lady," she said; but the woful eyes that looked into hers had no expression in them.

I went back to the visitors, and to all whom it concerned I made apologies and excuses for Lady Latimer. I told them she was exhausted and worn out, and that I had persuaded her to rest. No one seemed surprised, and then I felt that the crisis was over. She was saved.

"You look tired yourself, Miss Lovel," said Captain Fleming. "And what bad news this is about Colonel North."

"What is it?" I asked, trying to speak carelessly, but with great alarm.

"He has to leave suddenly and early to-morrow morning. He received a telegram this afternoon, but did not wish to tell us the news until the ball was over. We shall miss him very much."

"We shall, indeed," I answered, mechanically.

"He is in the smoking-room; he has spent the greater part of the night there. Would you like to see him and say good-bye to him, Miss Lovel?"

I shuddered. Please Heaven, I should never look on his face again. I made some evasive answer. He looked hurt.

"I thought," he said, "that you liked Colonel North so much. Lady Latimer does. I believe he is the favored guest."

"What time does he leave in the morning?" I asked, for the sake of showing some interest in him.

"Quite early," he replied. "He has to be at the Royal Horse Guards by noon."

"He will come back, I hope." I knew he would not.

I understood why he had returned to the house, and had gone to the smoking-room, where most of the guests could see him. Then, when the visitors were all gone, I went back to Lady Latimer's room. I found her very ill. I told the maid that I would sit with her and read her to sleep.

"I do not like my lady's looks at all, Miss Lovel," said the maid. "I am afraid that she has overdone herself. I should not wonder if she has a bad illness."

I sat with her the night through. She did not speak to me, she hardly seemed to know that I was present. She wept and moaned through the night in such a heart-breaking fashion it made me ill to listen.

She did not hear, poor child, what I heard—the quick galloping of a horse in the early morning. When it ceased I knew that Colonel North had gone.

She was worse in the morning; brain fever set in; the doctor was sent for hurriedly. The visitors disappeared.

Lord Latimer was frightened to death.

“Brain fever,” he said. “Why, brain fever only comes to those who have great trouble, and she has none in the world, absolutely none.”

The doctor’s opinion was that Lady Latimer had over-tired herself with the Christmas festivities.

“She had Colonel North to help her,” said Lord Latimer; “I do not see how she can have done too much.”

But there was no gainsaying the fact. She was ill for a long time, and I was her faithful, loving nurse; but the name of Colonel North was never mentioned between us from that night. It was New Year’s Eve when Lady Latimer fell ill, and the violets were in bloom before she was able to leave the house again.

“I want to go away from here, Audrey,” she said to me one day. “I want to go out-of-doors, and I can not here; I can not endure the sight of this place, and the sound of the river makes me ill.”

I understood, after that scene in the park; it was no wonder that she could not endure it.

I spoke to Lord Latimer, and he seemed pleased that she should have a change. We went to Brighton. I thought the life and brightness of that sunny watering-place would be good for her. I might as well have brought a dead body to the sea-side.

Once, and once only, terrible energy came to her. I was sitting on the cliff overlooking the sea, and she came to me suddenly, holding an open newspaper in her hands.

“I have been looking for you,” she said. “I want you to read this; it is your fault.”

I took the paper from her hands and read that war had broken out at the Cape, and among others who had exchanged to be sent out there was that well-known and highly esteemed officer, Colonel North.

"That is your fault," she said.

"Do you see the honorable mention of him as a brave soldier and a noble man?"

"Yes, I do," she answered.

"You may thank me for that," I said; "I saved him as well as you. English officers are men of honor, and if Colonel North had stolen the wife of his friend, they would not have associated with him."

Her face flushed and her head drooped.

"I wish," said she, "that I could fall from the cliff here into the sea."

Decidedly, in those days, she was not the most pleasant companion in the world; but I knew the gnawing misery.

"I wish," she said to me one day, "that Lord Latimer would leave Lorton's Cray. I shall never like the place again."

But Lord Latimer would not. He said that he would do anything in reason, and nothing from caprice, so that she was compelled to return. Then followed a dead blank, a dreary, dull blank. The sad, sorrowful woman, mistress of Lorton's Cray, did not in the least resemble the Lady Latimer of former days. I could not interest her, as formerly, in the boys, or in our simple home ways. She was simply a woman stricken by some terrible grief. I did my best, but it was all in vain. I could not cheer her or rouse her. It required a terrible calamity to do either. She had passed into a quiescent state. She made no allusion ever to the cause of her trouble. Colonel North's name was never mentioned.

Captain Fleming came once or twice, but he did not remain long. He told me that he had never seen any one so changed as Lady Latimer.

"When I think of her leading the cotillon on New Year's Eve, in that wonderful dress of blue velvet and pearls, and then look at her as she is now, I can not believe she is the same woman," he said.

It required a great calamity to arouse her, and, surely enough, one came. It was the month of August, two years and a half after that terrible New Year's Eve, and I was sitting out among the roses making some lace for her. I saw her coming toward me with a terrible look on her face. I was almost frightened. She wore a long white dress; her hair was unfastened, her face white as death;

her eyes had an expression I shall never forget. She held out a newspaper to me.

"Look," she said, "and read. Heaven has punished me."

I looked. In the list of those killed at Isandula was the name of Colonel Philip North.

"You see it?" she said, slowly.

"Yes, I see it, Lady Latimer."

"It was you who sent him to his death."

"Better the death of a good man than the life of a coward," I answered.

"He has died," she said, slowly, "because he loved me."

"No; that is wrong; he has died a soldier's death, and you may be proud of him. You can love him in death, whereas you could not in life. You may be proud of him, now he has redeemed by a hero's death what was a coward's crime."

She cried out that I was hard and cruel; she wept as I have never seen a woman weep before.

"I would go all the way to Isandula," she said, "to kiss his face just once before they lay him in his grave."

She was like a woman stricken with death.

Captain Fleming came down in the same sunny month of August, and he talked for hours about one who had been the hero of the fight. He told a hundred anecdotes of Colonel North, of his courage, his bravery, his kindness; how he was beloved by his friends, worshiped by the soldiers; how he was always ready with kindly words and generous help.

She listened with a white, set face, and spoke no word.

"I do not believe," said Captain Fleming, "that he had a blot in his life."

But we two women, who knew what a dark and terrible blot there had been, said nothing.

Lady Latimer was like a woman turned into stone.

Another great event happened in that sunny month of August.

Lord Latimer died quite suddenly. He had been unusually irritable, and complained of not being well, but no one suspected he was worse than usual. His valet, going to wake him one morning, found him dead in his bed, and the doctor said he had been dead for some hours.

There was no need for any inquest; he had died from heart disease, from which he had suffered many years.

It was a terrible blow to Lady Latimer; not that she loved him, but that it brought her sin and her sorrow so forcibly to her mind.

"How strange it seems that he should have died first," she said to me one day. "Oh, Audrey, God has punished my sin."

Then Lionel Fleming became Lord Latimer, and master of Lorton's Cray.

The old lord had left his wife a large fortune.

"I shall spend it all in charity," she said to me. "There is but one interest, one pleasure in life left, and that is doing good to others."

And it was perfectly true. If ever any woman tried to make up for a sin by charity and good deeds, Lady Latimer did.

The new Lord Latimer begged of us to remain at Lorton's Cray for some few months. He did not want to take possession until the spring of the year, and he prayed us to remain there. Lady Latimer consented, and we lived there in peace and seclusion until the Christmas snow was on the ground again and the New Year coming round.

CHAPTER XII.

No one but myself knew how I dreaded that coming New Year for Lady Latimer. She had left off hating me now, poor darling; she told me she knew it had all come about for the best.

"You acted rightly, Audrey," she said to me one day, when the dismal snow was falling, falling as if it never meant to stop, and there was an unutterable stillness over everything round Lorton's Cray. "Quite right, for you are a good woman, and could not do otherwise; but I love his memory now, as I loved him in life. I feel as if I should almost win heaven if I could lie by his side in the grave. Ah! he has no grave; no—"

She burst into passionate weeping, and I could say nothing to comfort her; that dead man had been the only love of her life—the one worship that comes to us all sooner or later. Alas for those to whom, like her, it comes too late!

She had been quietly content to stay at the old house,

wrapped up in her own sorrow and the good she was trying to do to all around her with her husband's legacy. She did not know that all heaven, as it seemed to me, lay at my feet, and I did not dare to stoop my hand and take it up. Lord Latimer found me alone in the cozy boudoir one dismal November day, when he came to see after some of the business of the estate, and almost before I knew what he was talking about, he asked me to be his wife.

My face spoke what my tongue could not utter, and he caught me in his arms and kissed me, not once, but a dozen times.

"I think we have understood each other all along, my darling," he said. "Look me in the face and tell me that you will be my wife, Audrey, my own."

I did not say it; I remembered my mother's words, and hesitated. Presently I told him what was in my heart, and how I could never marry him without the consent of my parents, and I doubted its being given. It was not for me, Audrey Lovel, to aspire to be mistress of Lorton's Cray. Lord Latimer laughed, and said it was all nonsense.

"Your father will consent," he said. "I will go to him to-day, and bring you his permission in an hour."

But my father refused, flatly and uncompromisingly, and would give no reason; and I went home broken-hearted after I had seen my lover ride away, with a dark look of determination on his face, to ask for an explanation. I knew what my dear mother's fear had been; that I should give my heart away and have nothing in return, that Lionel Fleming was only amusing himself by a flirtation with me; she did not know, dear mother, what a loyal heart she was misjudging. I heard my father's reason, and it nearly broke my heart. Never a rich man, he had been struggling for years with the difficulty of making both ends meet, and the boys had grown daily more expensive. He had seen a way, as he thought, by a safe speculation, to almost double his income by risking his small remaining capital; he had risked and lost. He had nothing now but his stipend, never enough to keep us in comfort; and mother was going to take in two boarders to spoil the dear home-circle, and the boys were to be sent out into the world as they grew old enough to fight the battle of life for themselves.

I understood the refusal now, and I could feel with my

father in his sorrowful pride. We were a proud race, we Lovels, and it would be said that the vicar had angled for the new Lord Latimer, and caught him for his daughter.

Lionel pressed me very hard for the reason of the refusal; but I would not tell him—how could I?—that I was too poor to come to him even properly appointed as to outfit, if by any chance I should be allowed to marry him.

“I shall be back at the New Year, my darling,” he said, taking me in his arms, as if he had never met with any rebuff, “and you will tell me then what it all means, and we will get out of the difficulty somehow.”

I would not see him at the New Year; I made up my mind to that. No use for these heartaches, when no good could come of them; so I begged of Lady Latimer to let me go home for the holiday-time—it would be the last time we should be together, for the new state of things was to begin with the coming year, and home would be home no longer with strangers in it and the big boys away.

She had some female friends coming to her for the holidays—good women with missions and notions, and I did not feel at home with them somehow. She was taking to that sort of thing, though she was not half strong-minded enough for it; and I had very little in common with the people it brought me in contact with. There always seemed so much of self and so little of Christian charity in their proceedings that I had no sympathy with them; they could do very well without me.

And so it came about that I was at home, very sad and heavy-hearted; but we were to have a wonderful New Year, after all. It was a winter of surprises. On Christmas morning there came the news, through my father's lawyers, that the risky speculation had not been a risk after all, but a tremendous success. A check for a large sum was inclosed, and a request that at his leisure the Reverend Archibald Lovel would go to town and confer with them about the remainder.

My father accepted it unsuspectingly. I had my doubts as to where the money came from, but I could not utter them. I expected I should see Lionel before long, and I did. I met him in the lane leading to the vicarage, and he bent down from his saddle, and said something about the silver lining turning up. I could not betray him.

The revulsion of feeling after so much relief would have broken my father's heart.

So I was very happy when the last day of the old year dawned bright and clear, as it had dawned on that day that seemed in the far past now, though it was only three years ago. The day could never be otherwise than a sad one for me, I thought; it will never be sad any more now.

My father had been to London and learned that, instead of being a ruined man, as he believed, he was richer than he had been before; and I had won him over to say that perhaps, in the future, if things went well with him, he would withdraw the decisive "No" that had been his answer to Lord Latimer. I knew what that meant; we only had to ask now, and the permission would be given. Lionel was coming to the vicarage in the evening, and then—ah, then! I could hardly persuade myself that it was all real, and that I should not wake from a blissful dream, and find the two boarders invading our happy home, and the dear boys gone.

It was growing dark, and I was sitting up in the old nursery, so full of childish memories of mischief and fun, when Millie, a tall slip of a girl now, and a person of immense importance in her own eyes, as the daughter of the house and mother's right hand, came up with a mysterious look on her face.

"There's some one asking for you, Audrey, dear," she said.

"For me! Who is it?" I said, with a sudden chill at my heart, for I fancied something must have happened to Lionel.

"I don't know," she said. "It is you he wants; I told him father and mother would not be long before they came in, but he does not want them."

"Where is he?"

"In the hall."

Millie evidently did not think much of my mysterious visitor. I hastened down, and there, under the lamp, stood a tall, white-haired man, rather shabbily dressed, who turned sharply as he heard my footsteps, and spoke in a voice choked with tears, it seemed to me.

"Miss Lovel," he said, "I have come to you for news before I go any further—I have come straight from the ship. How is she? Where is she? I know that he is

dead, or I should not be here. For Heaven's sake, tell me that she is alive and well—and free, or I shall go mad!”

Who was speaking to me? What familiar voice was sounding in my ears? Why did the face of this stranger with the snowy hair take the shape of that dead man's features, and his eyes look at me with the eyes of the man whose anger I braved on that bitter winter's night? I stared at him, feeling as if I were turning into stone.

“Colonel North!” I gasped out, “is it you, or am I going mad?”

He answered something; I saw his lips move, but the floor of the hall seemed to be rising up to meet me, and the walls and the dancing fire-light to be joining in a wild whirl. I heard a voice say something about having frightened me, and then the tall figure vanished in a sort of mist, and everything was black around me. It was in Lionel's arms that I came back to life; my head was on his shoulder, and my mother was standing by my side.

“Yes, it is true, dear,” she said, answering the question my eyes asked. “The colonel is not dead, he has come back after almost incredible hardships and escapes. He did not intend to frighten you so.”

He came to my side, a wan shadow of a man, utterly unlike the glorious specimen of manhood that I remembered so well, and when I was quite myself again, he asked me if Lady Latimer would welcome him.

“I should like to know that she forgives me,” he said, sadly. “If there can never be anything more between us, it would be a comfort to know that.”

Perhaps I was wrong to tell him how she had mourned him, but he wanted a crumb of comfort so badly, and I gave it to him. He shook his head.

“She will only think of me as she remembers me,” he said. “I am a poor, maimed creature, not fit for a gentle eye like hers to look at.”

“If there were only enough left of you to hold your soul, she would love you all the same,” I said.

It was an incautious speech, but it was true.

They made me go to Lorton's Cray to break the great news to my poor darling. I don't know how I did it, but I had not said half a dozen words before she guessed, and gave a great cry. I thought she would faint or go into violent hysterics; but she did not.

“Bring him, Audrey,” she said, “and if the sight of him does not kill me with joy, heaven will have begun for me from this hour.”

We brought him to her, Lionel and I, and shut the door on that meeting; it was not for any one to intrude on her joy.

The story of the colonel's wonderful escape and the adventures he went through afterward, before he could get away from his captors, is public property, and need not be repeated here; he had been found alive under circumstances that the natives thought miraculous, and they took possession of him as a sort of deity, an invulnerable creature whom nothing could kill. It was long before he could get away—he was watched too closely; and when he did, it was only to lie ill of fever for many months in a hospital at Cape Town. When he got well, he came straight back to England and to the woman he had loved and wronged, hearing in South Africa of the death of her husband.

There is nothing more to tell; what should there be? I finish this story on the eve of two weddings. For some time past there has been all sorts of preparation going on in King's Lorton, for everything that we two brides have, provided that the dear old town can furnish, has been procured there. The church is decorated with flowers, and the autumn sun shines clear and bright, for August has come round again. The year of Lady Lorton's widowhood is over, and to-morrow will see her the wife of the only man who ever had her heart.

And it is my to-morrow, too. I shall come out of the old church Lady Latimer. Lionel would take no more nays, and my father will help the bishop, who was once his school-fellow and chum, to marry me to the man of my choice. What has the future in store for us, I wonder? Nothing but happiness, if I may trust the songs of the birds and the sweet breath of the flowers that come in to me through the windows. I must go home now; I have plenty to do yet; but I had come to make a last arrangement with Lady Latimer—she will be my aunt to-morrow, by the way—a funny idea—and I have kept the pony-carriage waiting an unconscionable time. Lionel and Colonel North are to sleep at the hotel to-night, and will see us no more till we meet them in all our bravery at the altar. It

is time the colonel went. I can hear his voice singing in the drawing-room—all his sufferings have not spoiled that.

“ The arrow to the quiver,
And the wild bird to the tree;
The stream to meet the river,
And the river to the sea.
The waves are wedded to the beach,
And the shadows to the sea;
And like to like, and each to each,
And I—to thee.”

And the memory of the last time I heard him sing that song is all blotted out in the joy and happiness of the present, and the future stretches before us, unbroken by a pain, unshadowed by a cloud.

THE END.

A FATAL TEMPTATION.

CHAPTER I.

THE two doctors, although nearly of the same age, and living in the same place, had always more or less disliked each other. But when the shadow of death hung over the younger and less prosperous one, the elder man relented and became his friend. For many years Stephen Leigh had been the only doctor in Seafield. He had saved money enough to purchase Seafield House, a carriage, and a fine pair of horses. Just as he was thinking of advertising for a partner to undertake the more laborious work, a new doctor, to his great annoyance, came to the town. Dr. John Blantire, as he called himself, took a house just outside Seafield, named The Laurels; he had no carriage, nor did he seem to have much money; but he was clever. No one ever heard him laugh; he seemed to have but one pleasure in his life, that was his love for his fair-haired little son, a boy of seven when John Blantire first came to Seafield.

For seven years Dr. Blantire fought his way; then all at once he seemed to grow tired of the struggle, and became seriously ill. During this time there had been a sharp contest between the two medical men. Stephen Leigh, so long established, so well known, seemed always to have the best of it; but of late some of the leading families in Seafield had sent for John Blantire, whose manner had a charm of its own. Then Stephen Leigh spoke bitterly of his rival, and John Blantire, hearing of it, spoke more bitterly still. Matters went from bad to worse until John Blantire fell ill and sent for his rival to attend him. He was beyond all earthly help, as Dr. Leigh saw at once.

There was no rivalry then; all ill-feeling disappeared in

the presence of death. Stephen Leigh, bending over him, told him that he would not live beyond sunset; but the look that came over the dying man's face was not of sorrow or regret.

"You will see to my boy," he said, feebly. "We have not been good friends, you and I. I have been in your way; but instinct tells me you are a just and honorable man; you have no son of your own, you will befriend mine."

Stephen Leigh promised that he would do so; he had always liked the boy—he had always longed for a son of his own, and in some measure this little lad would fill the blank.

When the promise was given, John Blantire raised his eyes to the doctor's face, and, for the first time, mentioned his wife.

"I am glad to die," he said. "I have not cared to live since I lost my wife. I loved her with all my heart. She was a gentlewoman, highly connected. She—she—was my patient, when quite a young girl. I abused my trust. She—ah, poor child!—she loved me so—and I ran away with her! She died when Laurence was born. She had just one year of perfect happiness. I have been tired of life ever since; but, for the boy's sake, I have struggled on. Now I am worn out. You will take care of my son?"

"I will," answered Stephen Leigh; and, cold, practical, devoid of romance or sentiment, as he believed himself to be, he was greatly touched when father and son bid each other farewell.

Dr. Leigh carried out the dead man's instructions; the small sum of money which he had left was judiciously invested, and served to defray the expenses of the boy's education.

Stephen Leigh had always been one of the leading members of the pretty little sea-side town. He was a widower, with one daughter, a tall, handsome girl, the belle of the neighborhood, who was vain as she was handsome, and who, young as she was, possessed no small opinion of her own merits.

To Seafeld House, when he had finished his education, Laurence Carr Blantire came home. Dr. Leigh was not a generous man. His heart had been touched when his

rival died; but he had not felt at all inclined to be lavish to his rival's son. He spent the sum left to pay for the boy's education; but he had never added one shilling to it; he had never given the lad one tip—had never sent him a hamper to school. He had been strictly just, but never in the least degree generous.

He had set aside a small sum, barely sufficient for the purpose, to find Laurence in clothes and pocket-money; and it was arranged between them that Laurence should live with him, give him all the assistance in his power; while the doctor should teach him all that he knew, take him out to visit patients, and qualify him for his profession, with the prospect of taking him into partnership.

Dr. Leigh had always regretted that he had no son. He was proud and fond of his daughter; but, practically speaking, she was of no use to him; she could neither help in the business, nor could she succeed him, and the stern old doctor often thought, with a vague wonder, how strange it was that his rival's son should take the place of a son of his own.

Laurence Blantire had been living under Dr. Leigh's roof two years now. He had worked hard during that period, and he had suffered, too, for, with his crippled means, he had been unable to indulge in any of the pleasures and pursuits common to youth. It was but natural, therefore, that he should rejoice that the time had come when he would be able to earn sufficient money to live like a gentleman. His mother had been a Carr, and from her he inherited not only the family pride, but his aristocratic tastes, his fine, innate sense of delicacy, to say nothing of his personal attractions.

The poor people of Seafeld knew no more pleasant or cheery sight than the young doctor's handsome face; he was welcomed everywhere. More than once, people who dared take the liberty had suggested jestingly to Dr. Leigh that it was not improbable a marriage might take place between his ward and his daughter. But the old man knew better. He understood Marion's character, and had no fear whatever that she would bestow her affections on so insignificant a person as an obscure country practitioner. These two—one a handsome young man, high-spirited, genial, and clever, the other a witty, accomplished, and beautiful girl—had lived together for two years without

the smallest attempt at flirtation. The young doctor had never raised admiring eyes to Marion, and she had never deigned to think of him in the light of a possible suitor.

Marion Leigh's chief characteristic was a most unheroic one—a worship of rank and wealth. She was both vain and ambitious. She would have done almost anything to secure a bow from Lady Pemberton, of Pemberton Court, or from the old Countess of Haredale, both of whom were her father's patients—both of whom, too, lived in the neighborhood. The Countess of Haredale was still fond of society, and, at stated intervals, Erceldine, where she lived, was filled with guests.

At these times Marion was a prey to envy and jealousy. Her one great desire was that she might receive an invitation to some of the festivities that took place on these occasions. She had the greatest faith in her own charms, and she believed that, if she had an opportunity of displaying them, her fortune would be made. Young as she was, she had already given up all thoughts of love as unprofitable; to win for herself the highest position and the greatest wealth was the end and aim of her existence.

No wonder, then, that Miss Leigh regarded Laurence Blantire coldly, that she failed to recognize any charm in his genial manner. There was to be no nonsense, she had decreed to herself, when he came to live at Seafeld House, and there had been no nonsense. Nor was the young student inclined for any. The calm, dark eyes that looked down on him from such a height were powerless to move him. The exquisite coloring of the handsome face, the grace of the tall figure, were alike unheeded by him. They never disagreed; they seldom even spoke to each other. Marion prided herself on keeping the young man at a distance, and Laurence respected her evident wish that there should be as little as possible in common between them.

At present, Marion Leigh's ambitious desires had not met with their fulfillment. Neither Lady Pemberton nor the Countess of Haredale had taken the least notice of her. Both ladies were glad enough to send for the doctor when his services were required; but neither of them had the faintest notion of cultivating the acquaintance of his daughter. Marion had besought her father to make some slight allusion to her to the ladies; and, with a cynical

smile on his face, the old man had done so, but without producing the desired effect. Still Marion did not despair.

* * * * *

Seafield House was beautifully situated. It stood on the summit of a hill that overlooked the sea. Along the front of the house ran a long, wide, old-fashioned veranda, with pillars of twisted iron. There, one morning, stood Laurence Blantire. He was looking over the sea with that longing and passion for change and travel that spring in the heart of youth at the sight of the broad expanse of ocean. And there Dr. Leigh, coming out to smoke his morning cigar, found him, and took his seat in the veranda beside him.

"Laurence," said the doctor, slowly, "we have nothing very important in hand just now—no cases that require particular care and attention?"

"No," replied the young student; "there appears to be very little illness about."

"If there is nothing to prevent my doing so, I thought of going to London for three days," the doctor continued. "I should like to attend a meeting that takes place to-morrow. Do you think you could manage in my absence?"

"I think so, sir," replied Laurence.

"Then I shall go by the next train," Dr. Leigh said; "so that I have not many minutes to spare. By the way, Laurence, I do not interfere much with your pursuits and companions; but I was sorry to see you with Captain Walsh the other day."

Laurence looked up with laughing eyes.

"What is wrong with Captain Walsh, sir?" he asked. "He seems to me a good sort of fellow."

"Notwithstanding, if you will take my advice, you will have nothing to do with either Walsh or Squire Redfern; they are not fit associates for you. And I was sorry to hear that you had been seen with both of them."

"It is quite true, sir," returned Laurence, with an uneasy laugh. "I was with them three or four times last week; we played billiards. It is dull at times, and I am glad of a change. Captain Walsh is a droll fellow, and I must say that I enjoy his society."

The doctor looked with something like compassion at the young man beside him.

"Take care what you are doing, Laurence," he said. "Remember, I have warned you."

"I will remember, sir," he answered, his face flushing as he spoke. "They can not do me any harm."

"I shall be late," the doctor remarked, hurriedly, taking out his watch and looking at it. "I meant to have called at the bank; but I shall not have time. Will you go for me, Laurence?"

"With pleasure, sir," the young man replied; and again the dark-blue eyes wandered to the sunlit sea; perhaps he, too, longed to be going away. The doctor took out a pocket-book.

"I want you to pay this fifty pounds in to my account," he said. "You need not go to-day, if you are busy or pressed for time; but do not be later than Thursday with it. You will be careful, Laurence?"

"Yes, sir," said Laurence; and then the doctor rose, shook hands with him, and went his way, leaving the young man still standing and looking out over the sunlit waters, his mind filled with a hundred vain longings.

By and by, with a sigh, he withdrew his gaze and turned into the house, making his way to the surgery.

Every detail of that day, from the time he spent in the veranda to the hour in which he returned to Seafield House, plunged into the very depths of despair, was vividly impressed upon Laurence Blantire's mind. As he quitted Seafield House, Miss Thornton, a poor relation of the doctor, who lived with him, and was supposed to help in the housekeeping, passed him with a smile.

"A beautiful morning, Mr. Blantire," she said. She had a profound admiration for the handsome young student.

He passed proud Marion Leigh, who stood in the entrance hall with a basket of flowers in her hand. He just glanced at the picture—the exquisite coloring of the handsome face, the morning-dress of primrose hue, the scarlet blooms that filled the pretty basket.

"Good-morning, Mr. Blantire," she said, haughtily. Her father's assistant was less to her than the dust beneath her feet; and she considered the time spent in speaking to him wasted. She hardly allowed her eyes to linger on him.

"Good-morning, Miss Leigh," he replied. And he

thought that it was a great pity her pride should repulse, while her beauty attracted. Then he went on his way, humming softly:

“ If she be not fair to me,
What care I how fair she be?”

All through that glorious day, when his pulses were bounding and he longed to be free, he plodded through his duty, though at times he did raise his handsome young face with an air of weariness to the blue skies.

While he was on his way to St. Margaret's Bay, where one of the fishermen lay ill, he came to the turning that led to Pemberton Court, the residence of Lady Pemberton, where he saw a little pony-carriage, with a pair of cream-colored ponies, whose silver harness glittered in the sun. The carriage was empty, and a groom stood at the heads of the ponies.

Carelessly enough, Laurence wondered whose carriage it was—wondered why it was empty; and then, looking down the green lane, he saw a young girl, a girl slender and dainty, with a face of marvelous beauty and fairness, with hair that seemed to have caught the sunbeams captive, and large, dark, violet eyes. She did not look more than sixteen; and she had left the little pony-carriage for the purpose of gathering some woodbine, the perfume of which filled the air. She wore a dainty green-and-white dress, and soft white plumes shaded her beautiful face.

She was intent upon gathering the woodbine, she neither saw nor heard him—and he stood still to gaze at her. He had seen nothing like her—and he had not dreamed that there was anything so fair in the world.

Presently she turned to the groom, and said, brightly:
“ I think I have enough now, Thorpe.”

The next minute she was seated in the little carriage, and had driven out of his sight.

The roll of the carriage-wheels had died away, and still Laurence stood there, as if rooted to the spot. The summer morning had brought a new element into his life, his heart was beating as it had never done before. He had, for the first time, an idea of what the words “ youth,” “ beauty,” and “ love ” meant.

He had many patients still to see, and it was six o'clock before he reached Seafeld House, tired and worn with a

hard day's work. He dined alone; Miss Leigh had gone out. When dinner was over, he felt refreshed; but the house was lonely.

He was restless still; vague, beautiful dreams and possibilities were opening out to him, a change sweet and subtle seemed to have come to him; he wanted some one to whom he could speak; he could not bear solitude. Why should he, when the summer wind and the summer sea seemed to woo him? He put aside his book and went out; and, as he strolled along the beach, he met suddenly, walking arm in arm together, Squire Redfern and Captain Walsh.

The doctor's warning returned to Laurence's mind, and his manner was cold and stiff. Both gentlemen noticed it; perhaps it was because they felt some little pique that they resolved that he should go with them.

"We are just going to the Pemberton Arms for a game at billiards," said Squire Redfern. "Come with us, Laurence;" and, while he was thinking what excuse he could make to evade them, Captain Walsh laughed, and the sneer in his laugh annoyed the young fellow.

"Laurence looks like a good boy to-night," he said, "and not at all inclined to naughty ways. At some other time he will join us."

A quick flush dyed Laurence's face.

"I do not see why I should not go with you to-night, as well as at any other time, Captain Walsh," he replied, falling quickly into the trap laid for him.

Captain Walsh did not like the young fellow; he hated him for his high principle and honor, his integrity and good temper; any one of these qualities seemed like a reproach to him, who had none of them. Squire Redfern, on the contrary, appreciated his honest simplicity of character, and always enjoyed an hour or two with him.

"We must not play for high stakes," said the captain, with another sneer, as they gathered round the billiard-table at the Pemberton Arms.

The squire acquiesced. Some men might have been moved to pity by the new expression of awakening life on the handsome young face; not so Captain Walsh. He only wondered if the young fellow really had any money; if so, he decided in his own mind that this was the time to win it, for he seemed restless and agitated. The captain called for a bottle of champagne. He insisted that Laurence

should drink a glass; as he did so, the young student thought of the lovely face bent over the woodbine—and he drank to it. His veins seemed to thrill with new life, his heat to beat with new vigor. He played, and won. Success emboldened him; he played again, and lost; then prudence whispered to him it was time to give over.

Once more the sneer on the cold, cynical face of Captain Walsh stung him into doing what was wrong; he stayed on and played again; this time he won. The captain and the squire both complimented him on his success, and he himself grew intoxicated by it.

“Laurence,” Squire Redfern said, presently, “this is slow work. Come home with me to the Manor House—you and Captain Walsh. We will have supper and a game at loo.”

Again he would have declined, but that he heard his evil genius, Captain Walsh, say something in a low voice to the squire about playing with “penniless boys.” All the hot blood of the Carrs seemed suddenly to burn in his veins.

“I will teach him that I am no lad,” he thought. “I will play, and I will beat him.” Then he turned to the squire. “The doctor is from home,” he said. “It is dull at Seafeld House, being alone, and I shall be very pleased to spend a few hours with you.”

The good spirits who watch over the souls of the tempted might have wept over him as he walked away between his two false friends.

CHAPTER II.

WHEN the three had done justice to a *recherché* little supper, the footman arranged the card-table. The room in which they sat was the picture of comfort and luxury. The light of the lamps fell upon the genial, indifferent countenance of the squire, upon the cold, cynical features of the captain, and upon the handsome, flushed face of Laurence.

“It is a warm night,” said the squire. “We will have some champagne-cup.”

“We must be cautious how we take it,” laughed the captain; and then the game at loo began.

Laurence won a few pounds; he was bewildered and in-

toxicated with his success. His heart beat, his pulses throbbed, he forgot the warnings of the old doctor. His musical voice rang out in loud, cheery words—in genial laughter. The squire looked at him admiringly, the captain cynically. The spirit of the champagne-cup seemed to enter into the game. The squire, who drank deeply at all times, grew reckless; the captain, on the contrary, became more cautious.

Once more Laurence heard him say something in an under-tone to the squire about “loss of time,” and “boys without money.”

“I will teach him,” said Laurence to himself, “that I can play and pay.”

Luck seemed with him; he won still more. Then the captain doubled the stakes. He, in his turn, resolved to humiliate the young fellow whom he had called a “penniless boy;” he knew exactly how to do it.

“I hope,” he said, sneeringly, “that we are not playing too high for you.”

Laurence’s cheeks crimsoned; he felt that he almost hated this man, who treated him so contemptuously. He played again, more recklessly still this time—and won; then he lost. In a little while he had paid away all his winnings; and presently the captain remarked:

“You owe me five pounds now. No, let me see—five pounds seven.”

“You owe me five pounds!” The words went through him like an electric shock. Five pounds, and he had not one shilling! He had been boasting that he could play and pay. Was that cold, cynical man to gloat and triumph over him because he could not pay? A thousand times no! He could hardly understand how he had lost; only a few minutes since, and he had several sovereigns in his hand—now those same sovereigns were lying in a little heap at the captain’s right hand. Laurence saw an ugly smile on the captain’s lips, and suddenly he remembered that he had with him the doctor’s fifty pounds, all in gold, and untouched. He had not found time to take it to the bank. So great was his excitement, so intense the strain upon every nerve, that he did not think for the moment that he was doing wrong—he would pay the five pounds out of the doctor’s money, and refund it.

He did not stop to ask himself how he would be able to

do this. Without any hesitation, he opened the pocket-book and took from it five pounds. It was a triumphant moment, in which he saw the expression of the captain's face change from cold, cruel cynicism to one of respect.

"You play well, and you pay well. This is not your first game at loo!" exclaimed the captain, as though seized with a sudden admiration for his skill.

Laurence felt that he was no longer being laughed at; and he did not pause just then to think of anything else. He was quite unconscious that the captain could wind him round his little finger. And Laurence played on and on until every sovereign was lost. Then a cold shudder passed over him, and with a white, set face he rose.

"I must go," he said, huskily; "it is late."

"We must not keep you any longer," returned the squire, rising also, while the captain added:

"I do not know when I have enjoyed a game more," which, considering he had won over fifty pounds, was probably true.

If he saw the ghastly color of the young man's face, and the anguish in his eyes, he made no comment. It mattered little enough to him; he had won a considerable sum of money, and that was all he cared for; nor did the squire remark how the young fellow's lips quivered as he bid him "Good-night," raising his head proudly.

"Good-night," said the squire. "I hope we shall see you again." The truth was that his devotion to the champagne-cup had been so great, he hardly realized how much money had been lost or won. "Any time," he added, "that you wish to spend an hour or two pleasantly, make your way to the Manor House."

"Good-night," repeated the captain; and then Laurence passed out. The next moment he was standing under the light of the stars, like one bewildered. Until that moment he had not realized what he had done. That he had spent the doctor's money, and had no possible means of replacing it—the bare fact in all its horror was before him now. He who had never in his whole life wronged any one, who had never touched one penny piece that was not his own, had stolen fifty pounds! He had been so excited, so carried away, so desperate, so reckless, that he had forgotten everything; and now he stood there under the light of the stars, branded "thief."

Cold drops of moisture gathered on his brow. What was he to do? Where should he turn for help? What was to become of him? For the first time in his life he realized how utterly desolate and lonely he was—how friendless. There was not one to whom he could turn in his anguish. He knew that the old doctor would never spare him—he would have condemned his own son in the same circumstances.

What should he do? It was in vain he said to himself that he had not thought of what he was doing, in vain he tried to excuse himself. His very heart was sick with despair, his whole body trembled, yet the physical anguish was nothing compared with the anguish of mind, the fever of heart and brain. If he could but recall those last few hours, if he could but undo what he had done!

He never knew how he reached home; he remembered that, as he went up the broad staircase, he met Miss Thornton, who looked up in wonder at his wild, white face.

“You are ill, Mr. Blantire!” she said.

“No,” he replied, “I am only tired;” but the voice that spoke was not like his own, it sounded like nothing human; and he passed on to the terrible solitude of his own room.

No sleep came that night to the weary eyes of Laurence Blantire. Now that the mad excitement was ended, and the ugly, horrible truth lay before him, he was at a loss how to proceed. If, when the doctor had placed that fifty pounds in his hands, any one had even hinted that he could misapply or use for his own purpose one penny of it, he would have been most indignant; he could with difficulty realize even now how it happened that he had yielded so suddenly to this most terrible temptation. It seemed to him like some fearful dream.

How was he to face the day with its terrors? How was he to work with this suspense and dread tearing at his heart-strings? One thing was certain—he must get the money somewhere, and refund it. He must pay it into the bank before Dr. Leigh’s return; otherwise he would never be able to face the man whose trust he had so miserably betrayed. But where could he obtain such a sum as fifty pounds? Who would give or lend it to him? He had but four-and-twenty hours in which to find it, and before he

could give his attention to his own affairs, he must execute his ordinary duties.

"Mr. Blantire is ill, I am sure," Miss Thornton observed, the next morning, to Marion, with some anxiety. "His face looks quite haggard."

"Being a doctor," Miss Leigh replied, coolly, "he must know quite well what to prescribe for himself." What mattered the health or the look of her father's assistant to her?

As the hours of the long, terrible day wore on, wild thoughts came to Laurence Blantire. Death in any shape would be easier than to face disgrace and ruin.

He was crossing the road that led to the beach when he heard the clock strike four; the sound of each stroke smote upon his heart like a death-knell. The bank closed at four, and to-morrow Dr. Leigh would be home again. He knew then that all day long he had been sustained by a false hope, a wild, delusive idea that out of the very greatness of his trouble help must come.

Now the bank was closed, and a wave of anguish swept over his soul. If ever a bitter price were paid for sin, he paid it in that hour; but it was not until he reached home once more and gave himself up to his thoughts that the fullness of his ruin came before him. No idea of appealing to the doctor's mercy occurred to him; he knew it would be useless to ask him for pity or forgiveness. The doctor was just; but for such a crime as that he would have no toleration or compassion.

The manager of the bank was a kind-hearted, generous man; he wondered, if he went to him, whether he would be able to help him. Perhaps, considering the fact of his youth, of the great temptation, he might be pitiful to him.

"Yet," cried the despairing voice in his heart, "it is a forlorn hope; there is only one sure way of escape." True, death was a coward's resource; but he had proved himself a coward already. He believed that if he wrote to the doctor, making a confession of his crime, at the same time begging him not to make it public, and afterward destroyed himself, he would grant that prayer, although in life he would not spare him.

"Marion," said Miss Thornton, the same evening, "have you noticed anything strange in Mr. Blantire?"

"I am not in the habit of taking any interest in my father's assistant," was the haughty reply.

"I feel quite concerned about him," continued Miss Thornton, meditatively. "He has the appearance of one who is suffering deeply from some cause, mental or physical, and I am rather inclined to think the latter. I do not think he went to bed at all last night, for I awoke several times, and heard him pacing his room restlessly."

Miss Leigh smiled coldly.

"My dear cousin," she said, "young men of that age can be trusted to look after themselves; and I doubt if Mr. Blantire is one who would take anything greatly to heart."

"But, my dear, I am sure that there is something wrong—that something is troubling Mr. Blantire," persisted Miss Thornton.

"Depend upon it," lightly, "it is a mere delusion on your part," replied Marion.

Miss Leigh said to herself, over and over again, that Miss Thornton must be mistaken; and even were she not—if Laurence Blantire had some hidden sorrow, what had it to do with her? So she resumed her novel; but she could not quite banish the young doctor from her mind—the book had lost its interest. She had not infrequently been annoyed by the noise that Laurence made, singing and whistling. She remembered suddenly that she had not heard his voice once that day. Miss Thornton had gone to her own room with a nervous headache, and Marion sat alone; no sound came from the surgery, or from the young man's room—the very spirit of silence reigned in the house.

No, there was not a sound. For in his terrible despair Laurence had made up his mind to destroy himself, and he sat silently meditating in what manner he should accomplish his object. It was of no use wasting time in vain regrets; he had sinned, and he must pay the penalty. If he lived, the story of the young assistant who had appropriated his master's money to pay his gambling debts would be told far and near; if he died, it would be hushed up, and he would be forgiven.

And now the question was, what mode of death should he choose? It would be easy enough to take a small dose of prussic acid, and he would be dead in a few seconds; yet

he turned with a faint shudder from that picture. He would not be poisoned like a rat in a hole; he would die where the fresh breezes blew upon him.

He took up a revolver—one the doctor always kept loaded in the house—and scanned it curiously. Yes; he would walk far out on to the sands, where the rocks raised their jagged heads at low tide; he would use the revolver there, and the waves would carry his body out to sea. A thousand times better this than he should sleep in a dishonored grave. His letter to the doctor lay upon the table; he put the revolver into his pocket, and, without one backward look, opened the door of his room and passed out.

CHAPTER III.

MARION LEIGH, while trying to forget Miss Thornton's words and give her undivided attention to her book, was startled by hearing some one descend the staircase—some one who evidently did not wish to be heard, for the steps were slow and hushed. Glancing at the clock on the mantel-piece, she saw that the hands pointed to eleven, and wondered a little who could be going out at this late hour, unless indeed some one were ill, and the young doctor had been summoned. She hastily laid down her book, and went into the hall. There she encountered Laurence Blantire, and was at once struck by the ghastly pallor of his face and the wild despair in his eyes.

“What is the matter?” she cried, involuntarily.

He tried to pass her with a bow, for he dared not trust himself to speak.

“Where are you going?—what is the matter?” Marion persisted.

Again he would have passed her; but Marion, feeling vaguely alarmed at his wild appearance, and recollecting, perhaps, Miss Thornton's words, hastily interposed between him and the door, thus forming a barrier to his egress. So, for some few minutes, they stood looking at each other in perfect silence.

Then, for the first time in her life, Marion Leigh laid her hand on Laurence's arm, and looked with anxious, kindly eyes into his face.

"Trust me," she said, gently. "I see there is something wrong. Where are you going, Mr. Blantire?"

"I can not tell you," he replied; "pray do not detain me longer. Let me go."

"Not until you have told me where you are going at this hour of night," she said, firmly.

"I am going," he returned, slowly, "to put an end to my wretched existence."

If she felt any fear, she did not show it; at that moment she rose superior to herself.

"No man should take his life; it is not his own to do as he pleases with," she said, earnestly.

"Mine is utterly valueless!" he cried, despairingly.

Again Marion Leigh touched his arm.

"Come with me," she urged. "I will not keep you long."

He did not try to resist her, but allowed her to lead him back to the drawing-room where she had been sitting. Mechanically he took the chair she pushed toward him.

"Now, will you tell me what your trouble is?" Miss Leigh asked, gently. "I am sorry for you. I want to help you, and will help you if I can."

"You are very good," he answered, looking at her with haggard eyes; "but, if what I have done seems to me so horrible that it drives me to death, how can I tell you?"

"Trust me," she said, earnestly; "whatever your secret may be, I will keep it."

And then he told her his story in a low, shamed voice—told her of the doctor's warning, of his neglect of that warning, of his temptation, and his fall.

"I," he added, "who have hitherto preserved my honor untarnished, have branded myself 'thief,' and I can not bear the weight of my shame."

Miss Leigh listened gravely and intently.

"You have committed a great wrong," she said, when he ceased speaking; "but it was not like a premeditated evil. I can quite understand the suddenness of the temptation, and you yielded to it in a reckless moment." She was silent for some minutes, her gaze bent pityingly on the handsome head bent in abject sorrow and shame; then she went on, "After all, I see no reason to despair. I think you may retrieve the past—live it down. In your place, I should try to do so."

There was little hope in the haggard face raised to hers.

"I can not retrieve the past," he said. "I can not replace the money; the doctor can not be kept in ignorance of my conduct, and you understand him well enough to know that he will have no pity on me."

"I am afraid it is true," she answered. "If I had done the same thing, my father would not spare me. Still, I do not think," she continued, speaking in a business-like tone, "that there is any reason for you to think of sacrificing your life. I have heard my father say you are clever and likely to succeed in your profession."

"What can I do with a brand like this on me forever?" he cried. "I have ruined my prospects, I have blighted my life; I have, by my folly and sin, brought a curse upon myself. I might," he added, fiercely, "save myself if I could find fifty pounds; but, even if I did so, I could never respect myself again."

"You are young, strong, gifted, with most probably a long life before you. It is possible for you to redeem this one error of your youth," Miss Leigh rejoined, firmly.

"If repentance could wipe away my sin, it is atoned for already," he said; "but how can I replace the money?"

"Yes, that is the important question," Marion answered, knitting her brows—"how can you replace the money? I am trying to think if I can help you."

"You!" he cried, and his face brightened. "You are, indeed, my good angel!"

She smiled at the words, a cold smile, which did not warm his heart.

"I am not much like an angel," she responded; "but I should like to help you. It seems to me a sad thing for a life like yours to be wrecked for the sake of a paltry fifty pounds, and I think I see my way to getting it for you. I have saved forty pounds of my own out of what my father allows me for myself, and I can borrow ten from Miss Thornton, which will make up the sum you require."

"But how—how," he stammered, "shall I repay you?"

"You will earn money some of these days," she replied; "you can pay me then."

"You have saved me!" he cried, with a sudden burst of relief and gratitude, "you have saved me from death. Henceforth my life is yours, to do with as you will."

"Let us hope I shall never put your gratitude to so

severe a test," she returned, lightly; "but, if ever I need your help, I shall ask for it. And now," she added, "go to your room, and try to sleep. You shall have the money in the morning; and promise me that you will let this be a lesson to you."

* * * * *

Laurence Blantire looked very much ashamed, and his manner was nervous and constrained when he met Miss Leigh on the following morning. She, on the contrary, was as calm as though nothing unusual had passed between them. As a proof of her sympathy and friendliness, however, she held out her hand to him—an unusual circumstance with her; and Miss Thornton inwardly rejoiced to see that the imperious young mistress of the house was becoming more genial and well disposed to the young assistant.

"Could you spare me a few minutes at eleven, Mr. Blantire?" Miss Leigh asked, as they rose from the breakfast-table. He merely bowed assent; his heart was too full for words.

Punctually at the hour named, Marion went into the surgery, and having carefully closed the door behind her, took a seat.

"We must proceed in a business-like fashion," she said then. "I have the money—forty pounds of it is my own, and with the ten pounds borrowed from Miss Thornton, will make up the sum you require. I should advise you to pay it into the bank at once, before my father comes home. There is no need to thank me, I am pleased to help you; but, to show that I consider it a business transaction, I shall ask you to sign this receipt for the fifty pounds, and also to give me an I O U for the amount."

Perhaps, if he could have foreseen the uses to which those documents would be put, he would have hesitated to do as Marion requested; as it was, no thought of the future entered his mind. He signed the receipt and the I O U, then took up the bank-notes she held out.

He would have expressed his gratitude then; but Miss Leigh cut short his broken sentences by reminding him that there was no time to lose; so he was fain to take his departure. He hurried at once to the bank, and if the kindly manager wondered why the young doctor looked so

pale, and his manner was so strange, he made no remark upon it.

Laurence soon told his errand, and paid in the fifty pounds to the doctor's account. Then he walked slowly home, his heart filled with sincere repentance and the resolution to do better. He did not forget, for one moment, the shame of his crime; the remembrance of it would go with him to the grave; but he was freed from a great peril, and for the time he thought most of his freedom.

When Dr. Leigh returned and found all things well, he was pleased with Laurence's attention to the patients, his industry, and skill; he praised him as the grim old doctor seldom praised any one.

"I shall not hesitate about taking a week's holiday now," he said.

The young man's heart beat high with gratitude. If it had not been for Marion, how different and how terrible this meeting would have been!

The same evening the doctor inquired whether Laurence had paid the money he had left him into the bank, as he had directed him to do. The young man answered in the affirmative, and then the subject dropped.

One thing struck Dr. Leigh after his return trip to London, and that was that Laurence Blantire seemed suddenly to have become quite devoted to him. He slaved rather than worked; he saved the doctor all possible trouble. No son of his own could have studied his interests more. Dr. Leigh augured well from it. The young man would rise in his profession some day, he thought, and do credit to his teaching. He was pleased, too, that Laurence had given up his fast companions.

Just one week after that fatal game which had cost Laurence so dearly, he had met Captain Walsh, who hailed him with glee.

"Come to my place," he urged, "and try your luck again." But Laurence shook his head.

"A burned child dreads the fire," he replied.

"You don't say you were scorched?" rejoined the captain.

"So effectually as to be cured for the remainder of my life," Laurence said; and, without any further words, passed on.

"I might possibly have made a few pounds more out of him," soliloquized the captain. "It is strange that he should suddenly evince such a dislike for play. I'm afraid we frightened him last time."

Laurence Blantire set himself to work with renewed energy. Every penny he was able to save was always scrupulously handed over to Miss Leigh. He determined to deny himself every luxury and pleasure until he had paid this just and urgent debt.

Still, although he was repaying the money and felt that he was doing his best, the sense of shame never died, the pain and the humiliation remained. It seemed impossible that he should have done this thing. There were times when he could hardly believe it was anything but a bad dream. Marion Leigh had been his guardian angel. She had saved him from disgrace and despair; yet he never felt quite at ease with her. He was of a loving nature, grateful, and kindly. He would have done anything on earth for Marion Leigh; he would even have risked his life for her.

When with her he anticipated every want, every wish of hers. He brought her her favorite flowers, and read her favorite books to her aloud during the long winter evenings when he chanced to be at home; and the doctor, remarking this, smiled to himself a cynical smile.

"All love's labor lost!" he muttered. "Marion will never look at the lad, although she might do worse."

It may easily be imagined that all the household fell into the same error, and believed that young Blantire was in love with Marion; all but the lady herself, who never for one moment gave it a thought. So matters went on, until one morning Dr. Leigh sat in the breakfast-room, with the "Times" unfolded before him. Marion still lingered behind the urn, while Laurence, who had finished breakfast, was looking over some notes for the doctor.

Suddenly Dr. Leigh raised his head with a start.

"This must refer to you, Laurence," he said. "Listen:

"Fifty pounds reward offered to any one who can give reliable information as to the marriage of Sylvia Burton Carr with the late John Blantire, surgeon. Letters to be addressed to Messrs. North & Son, Solicitors, Lincoln's Inn Fields, London."

“Yes, it must refer to me, or, to speak more correctly, to my parents,” Laurence replied. “My mother’s name was Sylvia Burton Carr.”

Marion looked up, keenly interested, and the doctor cried:

“I thought so. You should write to those lawyers at once, Laurence. Rely upon it, the advertisement has something to do with you personally.”

CHAPTER IV.

DR. JOHN BLANTIRE spoke the truth on his death-bed when he said he had abused his trust. When quite young, just beginning his practice, and living in London, he had been called in to attend a young lady patient whose name was Sylvia Burton Carr—a girl not more than nineteen years of age. She lived with her father in a quiet, retired part of Highgate, evidently on a slender income; and John Blantire had no idea that they were related to the great family of the Carrs, of Carrswell.

There had been a quarrel between the brothers of the Carr family—the eldest, Sir Rudolph Carr, having disagreed with his two brothers, Richard and Edmund. Richard joined the army, and gained some distinction during the Crimean War, after which he returned home badly wounded. He died unmarried, and without being reconciled to his brothers. The good-natured Edmund had neither strength, energy, nor wealth—he simply drifted through life; he married early, and had one daughter, named after her mother, Sylvia Burton. He never made any attempt to increase his small income; he had none of the spirit or ambition of the Carrs. He was content to read and to dream his life away. When his daughter Sylvia was in her nineteenth year, she fell dangerously ill; and John Blantire, then a poor, struggling surgeon, was hastily summoned, as being the nearest and the cheapest doctor within reach. Sylvia Burton Carr fell madly in love with him, and he with her. He ought, at any rate, to have resisted his growing passion—he knew that he ought to have told her father; but he had not courage enough to do that.

“We shall be parted at once if my father knows of our attachment,” she said to him. “He is indifferent on all

subjects, but with regard to my future prospects he is decided. I am to marry what he pleases to call a gentleman. He would sooner see me dead than the wife of a poor doctor; but your wife I will be, John, nevertheless," she added, "and never the wife of any other man."

Eventually the young couple eloped, Sylvia declaring that it would be useless to endeavor to obtain her father's consent to their union. Mrs. Blantire never saw her father again. She had but one child, her son Laurence. The young man had never dreamed that the day and the hour would come when the Carrs, of Carrswell, would seek him. But the four sturdy sons of Sir Rudolph had died one after the other from various causes, and then the old baronet fell ill with grief and anxiety. He began to wonder who was to succeed him; his four sons were dead, his two brothers likewise—who was to take his place? Richard had left no children. Edmund had one daughter—Sylvia Burton Carr; they found the registry of her birth; but they could find no trace of her. Her father was dead, her neighbors had long since lost sight of her. It was only after infinite trouble that the lawyers succeeded in discovering that she had married John Blantire, and had had one son.

This son, if he were living, was indisputably Sir Rudolph's heir and the future master of Carrswell, and forthwith the search recommenced for him. No one knew where John Blantire had taken his wife; whether he himself was living or dead, or whether his son was alive; hence the advertisement that had attracted the doctor's notice.

When Messrs. North & Son received Laurence's first letter, Mr. North, the senior partner, answered it in person. It may be imagined what a sensation this visit caused at Seafield House; and when he told his errand the sensation was greater still. Mr. North smiled when he saw Laurence.

"You certainly have the Carr features," he said. "When you go to Carrswell, you will see many faces hanging on the walls there just like your own. There needs little confirmation of the fact that you are the son of Sylvia Burton Carr, and, when that is proved, you will be installed as Sir Rudolph's heir."

The young assistant listened with a white, grave face that somewhat surprised the lawyer. He had expected

some natural elation of spirits at the news he brought; but there was none. The young man's face grew graver and paler; he was thinking what a stain he had brought on an honored name, that he was unfit to uphold the glories of an ancient race because he had branded himself "thief."

How happy he would have been now but for the remembrance of his unworthiness! Rank, wealth, such as he had never imagined, were within his grasp, and he could not enjoy them because of the one wrong he had committed. Granted that he had done his best to atone for it, that he had repented bitterly, still the shadow of sin was upon him, would remain upon him all his life.

So he listened with a pale, shadowed face to the description of the brilliant future in store for him.

"If all goes well," Mr. North went on, "you will succeed to Carrswell and twenty thousand per annum. You do not look so delighted, Mr. Blantire, as I should do in your place."

"I am not worthy of it," he replied.

"You probably understand your own value," Mr. North rejoined, gravely.

Laurence could not, as he longed to do, hold out his hand to him and say:

"My hands are not clean—they are not the hands of a just and honest man. I have misappropriated my employer's money." He could not tell him this, although he wished to do so.

Afterward, when that long private interview was ended, and Mr. North saw Dr. Leigh, he told that gentleman he had conceived a strong admiration for his protégé. He had shown no elation at his sudden elevation to rank and wealth; his only thought seemed to be that he was unworthy to fill such a responsible position.

"I am seldom mistaken in my reading of character," said Mr. North, "and I am quite sure that there is the promise of a great man in him."

"There was the promise of a good, hard-working doctor in him," returned Dr. Leigh; he was quite pleased with the turn of events. There might be many baronets; but no one could supply Laurence Blantire's place to him.

When Miss Thornton heard the news, she cried out, "I always thought that he was a prince in disguise!" and

every one, including Laurence himself, laughed at her kindly enthusiasm.

“I have not felt much like a prince,” he said.

Dr. Leigh pressed the lawyer to remain for the night. He was to take Laurence to Carrswell on the morrow. After dinner, while the cold wind wailed round the house, and bent the bare branches of the trees, they all gathered around the fire in the drawing-room, and the conversation, as was natural, turned upon Carrswell. Mr. North spoke of its grandeur, its extent, and antiquity, of the picture-galleries filled with magnificent works of art; but Laurence’s face grew no brighter as he listened, for the memory of that horrible time was stinging him with most bitter pain. But for that, how happy he would have been!

“It seems almost incredible,” he said at last, “that all this should belong to me!”

“And it surprises me,” rejoined the lawyer, “that you are not more pleased at your inheritance.”

After telling them of the rare and valuable books that lined the library walls, he said:

“I remarked one strange thing, when I went with Sir Rudolph to look at the family portraits, that, while the men of the race are all fair, their wives are in every case brunettes—all the Ladies Carr have dark eyes and dark hair.”

He paused for a few moments, struck by the dark eyes looking into his own—quiet and searching eyes which fell as they met his gaze.

“Ten to one,” said the lawyer to himself, “that our young heir is in love with her. I do not blame him, if it be so. She is handsome enough to win any man’s heart.”

Every one in Seafeld soon heard the news concerning Laurence Blantire, that he was heir to a great estate and title, that his mother had belonged to a good old family, and his father had run away with her. Before long it was known all over the country-side, and every one rejoiced to hear of the young doctor’s good fortune. So many people came to see and to congratulate him, that Laurence had little time for his adieus. He found a few minutes for Miss Leigh. He sent to ask her if she would see him, and she hastened to the conservatory, where he awaited her. She held out her hand, and smiled as she greeted him.

"I am asking myself," she said, "if it be a fairy tale, or if it be true."

"It is true," he replied, "quite true. You can imagine how great is my gratitude to you; but for you rank and fortune would have found me in a dishonored grave. Think how much I owe you! Tell me, how shall I prove my gratitude to you?"

"You say you wish to prove your gratitude to me," she replied. "Perhaps the day may come when I shall ask you to do so."

"I shall not fail you," he said, earnestly.

"Remember your words," she returned. "When I ask a favor, I shall remind you of them."

"No need to do that," he assured her. "I realize now," he went on, "what sin is; but for that dark background, I should be the happiest man in the world."

"You must forget it," she said, gently; and, looking at her with troubled eyes, he answered:

"It is the one thing I shall never be able to forget."

Mr. North came down-stairs just in time to witness the end of this little *tête-à-tête*; it was not unnatural that he should have misunderstood it, and feel more sure than ever that there was a love affair between the two young people.

"The most likely thing in the world," he thought. "I must speak to Sir Rudolph about it. He must make no opposition; the girl is very handsome, but—cold—cold and proud—still she evidently pleases him."

Ten minutes afterward a little group stood in the entrance hall of Seafield House. The doctor, almost angry, certainly quite impatient with the course of events, waiting to say good-bye, Miss Thornton weeping tears of real regret, Marion calm and pale.

"Good-bye, Laurence," said the doctor. "Let me recommend you to go on with your studies, although you are or will be a rich man."

"Good-bye, Mr. Blantire," echoed Miss Thornton. "You will not forget us, I know."

He shook hands with Marion as they stood under the hall-lamp, just as they had done on that night, three months ago, when she saved his life. The memory of it came back strongly to both of them; the color rushed into her face, while his grew deathly pale.

He left Seafield House with good wishes and kind words

lingering in his ears, but all deadened by the dark memory of his sin; only for that, how brightly happy he would have been!

“Only think,” cried Miss Thornton, as the carriage disappeared, “that we have been entertaining all this time a prince in disguise!”

“I do not think he has had much entertainment; he has worked harder than he will ever do again,” the doctor rejoined grimly.

“I should like to see Carrswell,” observed Marion, reflectively.

“You will be sure to see it some day,” her father assured her, with a smile. “Laurence will ask us to Carrswell as soon as he is master of it.”

Then Dr. Leigh went out on his rounds, and the household regained its usual calm.

It was late in the afternoon when the lawyer, accompanied by the young heir, arrived at Carrswell. Laurence was very silent as the carriage, which met them at the station, drove through the spacious and magnificent park—he was more silent still when the mansion itself came into view.

“I am the first Carr who has entered this house with the stain of a crime on his soul,” thought the young heir; and the lawyer wondered again how any one could see this magnificent heritage and show so little emotion.

If he could but forget it—just for one hour! If he could regain the lightness of heart; the ease of mind, the serenity of conscience that had been his four months ago! Oh, thrice accursed sin, the memory of which would not die!—oh, dark and miserable shadow, that even all the glory of his present life could not brighten!

Sir Rudolph was very ill—too ill to see the young heir on the night of his arrival; but the next morning he desired his presence. Sir Rudolph lay in one of the state chambers—he looked very ill, very gray, and haggard.

“Welcome to Carrswell!” he said cordially though feebly. “You take the place of my sons to me.”

“I wish,” returned Laurence, gently, “that I could take the place of one son to you.”

“I like the boy,” said Sir Rudolph, a few minutes later. “North, are all the documents right?”

The lawyer drew near with a roll of papers in his hand.

"I have everything here, Sir Rudolph, that can possibly be needed—certificates of the birth, marriage, and death of your brother, Edmund Carr, certificates of the birth, marriage, and death of his daughter, Sylvia Burton Carr, of the death of her husband, John Blantire, and of the birth of this young man, Laurence Carr Blantire."

"He must drop the name of Blantire, and take that of Carr," said Sir Rudolph. "Come nearer to me," he continued; then, turning to the lawyer: "You are right, North; he has the true Carr face; no one could mistake him. If—if—I could have foreseen that I should have lost my sons, my four bonny lads, I would have tried to find the Blantires long ago. He looks good—he looks honest and true. Laurence, you will try to do credit to the old name?"

"That I will, Heaven helping me!" he replied.

"You will be a rich and a great man; you must be a good one also, or the rest will not avail."

"I will try, Heaven helping me," he answered. The recollection of that terrible fall of his was too strong upon him to allow him to say more.

"I like this boy," thought the baronet; "he is modest and unassuming. Come nearer still, Laurence," he went on, aloud. "You are very young to find yourself placed in such a position; you will have many temptations; men will crowd round you—and women—ah! women, too—But perhaps you have a safeguard—have you?"

Laurence thought of the beautiful face that had so strangely impressed him; and, even as he thought of it, the expression of his own face changed and grew more bright and tender.

"I have," he replied; and there was quite another tone in his voice as he spoke.

"That is right," said the baronet; "the heart of a young man is best in safe keeping. I shall not live long, Laurence, and for the short time I have to spend on earth you must remain with me, and try to learn how to manage a large estate. When I am gone, you can bring your bride home."

An impulse came over the young man to say, "I do not even know the name of the girl I love"—he never thought of Marion—she had been very good to him, she was very

handsome and very proud, she had saved his life, but she never entered his thoughts as a girl to love and marry.

“When you have time,” continued the baronet, “look round at the pictured faces of the Ladies Carr—they were all gentlewomen—bring one worthy to place with them. Remember, you are the heir of Carrswell,” he added. “You must take up your position as son of the house, and I will give you the horses that belonged to my eldest son. He loved art, and would go to Rome, where he died of malaria. Oh, Heaven! my sons, my sons!”

Sir Rudolph suddenly gave way to a paroxysm of passionate grief, which seemed to take what little strength he had away.

When the doctor came he told Laurence he had better leave the room; but he raised his fair head with something like defiance.

“No,” he said, “if I am to be his comforter, and take the place of those he has lost, let me begin now.”

So it was Laurence who put aside lawyer and doctor, and whispered words of loving comfort to the miserable man; it was Laurence who sat up with him the whole night through, consoling him when that passionate, despairing cry for his lost sons escaped him.

Every one pronounced the young heir to be of the right metal. Who should know or guess that, in all he did, he was actuated by the desire to atone for a great sin?

Contrary to expectation, Sir Rudolph survived several months after Laurence Blantire’s arrival at Carrswell; and during that time the baronet became greatly attached to the young man, while the latter continued to show him all the attention and devotion he might have expected from a son. In those few months Laurence seemed suddenly to have changed from a careless, light-hearted boy into a thoughtful, earnest man; the shame and the pain at the memory of his sin were always with him.

He was perpetually drawing contrasts between what was and what might have been. Had he met with his deserts, he would have been lying in prison, or, still worse, have been lying in a dishonored grave; yet here he was, heir to such wealth and magnificence as he had never dreamed of, beloved, respected, and esteemed by every one.

It was the mercy of Heaven that stood between his sin and its punishment. One idea possessed him; he would

endeavor to expiate the error of his youth by the good deeds of his manhood, so he set diligently to work to learn the duties of a large land-owner.

“When you succeed to Carrswell,” Sir Rudolph said to him one day, “I would advise you not to have a steward or agent—attend to the estate yourself; let no one interfere between you and your people.” And Laurence resolved to do as the baronet wished.

CHAPTER V.

It was about three months after Laurence’s installation as the heir of Carrswell that Sir Rudolph sent for him to his room one morning.

“Laurence,” he said, “owing to my illness you have had no opportunity of meeting our friends and neighbors. Here is a letter from the Earl of Norwich; he lives at Swanscourt, about six miles from here, and he asks you to a dinner-party next week, to be followed by a ball in the evening.”

“I would much rather decline the invitation and remain at home with you,” the young man replied. “I do not like to leave you.”

“This is a social duty, you see, Laurence, one of the kind that ought to be fulfilled, whether we like it or not. The Earl of Norwich is one of our leading men; he has always shown the greatest courtesy and kindness toward me; doubtless he intends to continue the same toward you. You must go, Laurie.”

“If you wish it, sir,” Laurence replied.

It was something of an ordeal for him to dine with half the magnates of the county, to say nothing of attending the ball afterward; but, of course, if it were a duty, it must be done.

“You will make the acquaintance of the loveliest girl I have ever seen,” said Sir Rudolph, “the earl’s daughter, Lady Magdalen d’Este—D’Este is the name of the Norwich family. The earl has but this one daughter; but she will be no great heiress—his estates are entailed, and the money goes with the estates; but, as I said before, she is the loveliest girl I have ever seen, and time was when I was a judge of a pretty face, and, though you have a safeguard, you will find my warning needed,” he added, with

a faint smile, "for I assure you that few young men see Lady Magdalen d'Este without losing their hearts."

"I do not think there is any fear in my case," answered Laurence, his thoughts reverting at once to the beautiful girl who had so entirely bewitched him.

On the day indicated, young Blantire went to Swanscourt, and was most cordially welcomed by the earl and countess.

"We have been longing to make your acquaintance," said Lord Norwich; "but Sir Rudolph has been so ill, it seemed hardly right to trouble him with visitors. You are welcome to Swanscourt. As we are to be neighbors, we ought to know each other."

Lord Norwich was a kind, large-hearted, generous man. Lady Norwich was a nonentity. Though she was a handsome woman still, it was a languid kind of beauty, quite in accordance with her weak, sentimental character.

"You have not been introduced to my daughter," she said. Her heart warmed to the handsome, gallant young fellow, whom she felt sure her daughter would like. "Come with me," she added. "Lady Magdalen is generally surrounded by a little court of admirers; she is at the further end of the room."

So saying, the countess laid the tips of her gloved fingers on his arm. As they passed down the long room, she stopped two or three times to introduce him to different people.

Presently they paused before a beautiful, graceful girl. The light from the chandelier fell full upon her. Laurence saw the gleam of white pearls in the bright coils of hair, and then his eyes rested on her face. A low exclamation burst involuntarily from his lips. It was the same face he had seen but once before in his life, but which had haunted his dreams persistently—the face of the girl he loved.

The countess looked up at him at that sudden exclamation. He had grown deathly pale. She smiled complacently. He was not the first one upon whom her daughter's charms had had a similar effect.

Meanwhile, the little crowd of admirers made way for the countess and the stranger, then the lovely face was turned smilingly to Laurence, the beautiful eyes rested kindly on him, as Lady Magdalen said a few words in a voice that seemed to him like sweetest music—only a mo-

ment, and then she moved away to speak to some one else. When the countess left him, Laurence remained standing like a man in a dream. His eyes followed every movement of that graceful figure, saw nothing else—no one else; he forgot everything except the presence of Lady Magdalen d'Este.

He never remembered afterward with whom he went down to dinner, of what viands he partook, or what subjects were discussed.

There was an hour to pass in the drawing-room before the ball began. Laurence saw Lady Magdalen standing by one of the small tables—she had carelessly taken up an engraving, and was examining it. He crossed over to her. She turned her bright face to him, with a charming smile.

“I have seen you before, Lady Magdalen,” he said, a little abruptly; and then he paused, for the beautiful eyes were looking at him with a wondering smile. “I have seen you before,” he repeated, “and I have never forgotten it.”

“I do not remember ever meeting you,” she answered, with a puzzled air.

“No, no,” he rejoined, hastily. “You did not see me. It was one morning in the summer. You were gathering wild flowers.”

“But where?” she asked, laughingly. “I have gathered wild flowers so frequently and in so many different places. Where was it?”

“At Seafeld,” he replied. “I lived there; and one morning, when I was walking to St. Margaret’s Bay—I—saw you.”

Her face brightened.

“I remember Seafeld,” she said, “a lovely place by the sea. I was staying with Lady Pemberton—at Pemberton Court, and it must have been during my visit to her that you saw me; but,” she added, her beautiful eyes looking frankly into his own, “if such was the case, how was it that I did not see you?”

“Should you have remembered me if you had done so?” he asked, eagerly.

She was silent for a few moments.

“I do not know,” she replied. “I see so many faces—”

“And I,” he said, speaking out the thoughts of his heart, without pausing to think whether it were discreet to

do so or not—"and I, since I saw your face, have seen no other."

"It is time we went to the ball-room," she said, hurriedly.

"Will you let me dance just once with you?" he whispered.

She flushed rosy red as she answered:

"Yes."

If Sir Rudolph noticed any change in Laurence after his visit to Swanscourt, he made no comment on the fact. The dearest wish of his heart had been that one of his sons should marry Lady Magdalen d'Este—he had the same wish with regard to his young kinsman, but he never gave expression to it.

After this Laurence went over frequently to Swanscourt, where he was always a most welcome guest. The earl and countess both liked him; they had the same idea, that he would be an excellent *parti* for their beautiful daughter; what she thought on this subject was not so well known. Lady Magdalen was always kind to him—always beautiful and charming, but she did not wear her heart on her sleeve.

Laurence said nothing to any one of the great hope of his life, the desire to win Lady Magdalen d'Este for his wife. Sir Rudolph was so ill that he required all his care and attention; it was hardly the time to trouble him about a love affair.

The earl and countess went on the Continent early in the year, and their daughter accompanied them. In the meanwhile, Laurence had proved his gratitude to those he had known at Seafeld. He had first of all paid his debt to Marion, sending her, at the same time, a letter filled with expressions of gratitude and affection; then he had lavished presents upon them all—not forgetting Miss Thornton.

"I always said he was a prince in disguise," that lady declared, emphatically, as she admired his costly gifts. "Who but he would have thought of me?"

Miss Leigh received a magnificent set of rubies.

"They are too good for me to wear in this place," said Marion, thoughtfully; "but I shall not always be here."

She often looked thoughtful in those days, for a great plan was maturing in her mind.

And so the time sped on, and at length Sir Rudolph, after a long illness, died—only too thankful to be permitted to lay down the burden of life. He died with his hands clasped in Laurence's. The baronet was laid to rest, amid all the solemn and sorrowful paraphernalia of death, and Laurence became lord of Carrswell. No future ever seemed brighter than his, no prospects fairer. Young, handsome, gifted with every good gift that life holds, who would not have envied him? And who could possibly have told that a shadow hung over him, so black that it darkened his golden present? Who would have dreamed of a skeleton in that magnificent house? But the shadow and the skeletons were the memory of one and the same thing.

Those who had to deal with Sir Laurence Carr, as he was now called, could not help noticing how kind, gentle, and generous he was to all evil-doers. He could never be persuaded to punish a man for his first offense.

"Give him another chance," he would say. "It is the first offense—we do not know how sorely he was tempted—let him try again."

On the death of Sir Rudolph, Laurence found himself the possessor of an income of twenty thousand per annum, of a large sum of money that had accumulated since the death of Sir Rudolph's sons, lord of the rich domain of Carrswell, owner of all the treasures contained in that grand old mansion. Rich and unfettered, what more could he desire? He owned to himself that he would have been one of the happiest men in the world if he had never done wrong. He had looked over the family jewels, and had lost himself in a dream of delight. They should deck his darling—they should clasp the beautiful white throat, they should bind the shapely arms, they should add to the beauty which was already priceless. The thought of that time, when he should have won her, was like a dream of a distant heaven to him.

He was lonely in the grand old mansion; it was too soon after Sir Rudolph's death to invite friends, so he peopled the large rooms and the lofty corridors with his fancies; he saw there always a beautiful, fair-haired girl; he pictured little children with eyes like hers; he heard the sweet babble of baby voices, the soft patter of children's feet,

and then, for a time wrapped in sweet fancies, he would almost forget his sin.

Why should it shadow his whole life? Often and often had he asked himself the question. It was all over and ended; he had repaid the money; no one knew anything of it, save Marion Leigh, and she would never betray him; the world would never know it, his character would never suffer from it; therefore, he asked himself, with fresh courage, how could his sin darken his whole life?

The answer was not long in coming.

CHAPTER VI.

It was with no small feeling of delight that Sir Laurence Carr heard that the Earl and Countess of Norwich were expected home. On the day after their arrival, he went over to Swanscourt. Lord and Lady Norwich had always received him with the kindest courtesy; this morning they were more gracious than ever.

When they had talked for some little time, the earl rode out to keep an appointment, and the countess excused herself on the plea of receiving some visitors.

"You will find Lady Magdalen out in the garden," she said.

That was what he wanted, to be alone with Lady Magdalen, if but for a few minutes; and he hurried through the grounds in search of her. Her fair face flushed when she saw him. He had not intended to tell her of his love, because it would not be quite decorous so soon after Sir Rudolph's death.

She held out her hand to him, and looked into his face with kindly eyes.

"Lady Norwich told me I should find you here," he said.

"Yes," she answered; "I delight in being in the fresh air. What a lovely morning this is, Sir Laurence."

She was standing near a little fountain under a spreading chestnut-tree; near it was a rustic seat.

"Shall we sit down?" she said, taking a seat near the marble basin, and making room for him beside her.

He could hear the beating of his own heart as he accepted her invitation. He was so happy that he forgot even his sin; the memory of it did not creep into that sun-

lit hour. Of course he was not going to make love to her, although love shone in his eyes, trembled on his lips, was revealed in every word and gesture. He reverted to the old theme—where he had first met her; and they talked about Seafield and St. Margaret's Bay.

In some way—she never could quite tell how it happened—the flowers that she had been carrying lay on the grass at her feet, and her hand rested in his. She was so surprised that she made no effort to withdraw it; and presently she asked him to tell her the story of his life at Seafield.

“I can not quite make out,” she said, when he had finished, “whether you like this Marion Leigh or not.”

“She was very kind to me once,” he answered; “but, as a rule, we saw very little of each other. I must always be grateful to her for a service she once rendered me.”

Lady Magdalen d'Este thought, with some relief, that love and gratitude do not always go together.

Soon the other hand was made prisoner, and he was pouring out his whole heart to her, telling her what he hoped to do in the future, what great ends and aims he had fashioned for himself, and of a sweet rest and hope, the fulfillment of which would crown his life. She listened with deepest sympathy, her beautiful eyes meeting his, her fair face changing as his moods changed.

He had declared to himself that he would not make love to her; but he bent his handsome head over her, and looked at her with ardent eyes.

“It was in August I saw you first,” he said. “When August comes round again I shall have a question to ask you. May I ask it?”

She bent her head. She knew in her own heart what the question would be, and in her heart she answered, “Yes.”

“I wish,” he said, “this morning could last forever.”

“So do I,” she sighed.

And then—neither of them knew how it happened—he kissed her; and her heart went out to him in that moment, never to come back to her again.

* * * * *

Later on in the season, the earl and countess left Swanscourt again; they had accepted an invitation to spend some weeks at Ryde. Sir Laurence only saw Lady Magdalen once before her departure.

"Going away again," he said, "just as Swanscourt looks its best! It does indeed seem a pity."

"I do not want to go," she answered, in a low voice. "I would rather remain here."

"When will you return?" he asked.

"We shall be here in August," she replied; and, as she spoke, a beautiful, tender flush dyed her face.

"In August!" he cried. "That is a good omen for me. It is in August that I shall have to ask you to answer a certain question; and, Lady Magdalen," he added, suddenly, "will you do me one great favor? You will not be angry because I ask it?"

"I could never be angry with you, Sir Laurence," she replied.

"Will you write to me sometimes? It is not very much to ask—a letter every now and then, just to tell me that you are well. It will be all I shall have to live upon until your return—will you?"

Lady Magdalen looked thoughtful.

"I do not know," she said; "that will be keeping up a correspondence, will it not?"

"A very harmless one," he answered. "Let me write to you, let me tell you all about the poor people at Carrswell. I know how much you are interested in them, and I know just what it will please you to hear. May I write?"

A bright smile came over her face.

"I think I should like that very much, indeed," she returned.

"And you will send just a few lines in answer?" he pleaded.

Lady Magdalen d'Este could not resist him.

"Yes," she said, "I will answer your letters when you write."

Having allowed him to hold her hands tightly clasped, to kiss her, having given him her heart, knowing that he loved her, it would be nonsense to refuse so small a favor as a letter. Her kindness made him bolder. They were bidding each other farewell in the garden at Swanscourt.

"Give me something," he said, "to remember this hour and your words."

She turned to a bush near, and plucking a white rose, placed it silently in his hand.

“Thank you,” he said; “but I want something more—remember, I have to live without seeing you until August.”

She knew—she felt sure that, when she came back to Swanscourt, he would tell her that he loved her, and would ask her to be his wife. There had been no mention of love or marriage between them yet; but her faith in him was so perfect that she raised her face to his and kissed him. Words might have been said then that were irrevocable, but that Lady Norwich suddenly appeared.

“I am sorry we are going,” she said to the young man; “we shall see nothing at Ryde so pretty as this. It is good-bye until August,” she added, as she shook hands with him.

“Good-bye until August,” echoed Lady Magdalen. Her hand lay for a few moments in Sir Laurence’s—her face flushed—her eyes met his—and they both knew—both understood; no more words were needed.

The family from Swanscourt went away that day, and on the morrow came a letter from Dr. Leigh—he had not been well lately—he said he wanted change of air, and he would avail himself of Sir Laurence’s oft-given invitation, and bring Marion with him for a few weeks—he had engaged some one to take charge of his practice, so that he should feel quite at ease while he was away.

“I have not had a real holiday since my honey-moon,” wrote the doctor—“that is more than twenty years ago—you may imagine how much I shall enjoy this. Marion looks forward to it with even greater pleasure and anticipation than I do. We shall hope to be with you by the end of the month.”

A kindly letter—and Sir Laurence had certainly often written to invite them. He was most anxious to see them; he had thought of it often, and had made plans for their amusement. He could not tell why a shudder came over him, why there was a sense of coming sorrow and trouble. Then he laughed at himself. What could it be? What sorrow could be drawing near him? He shook aside impatiently this feeling of oppression, and set to work in real earnest to provide amusement for his coming guests—perhaps in the depths of his heart there was some little dislike to seeing Marion again. She was the only one who knew of that shameful past; her presence would bring it all the more vividly before him. It was but natural that he

should shrink from seeing her. Still, but for her kindness—her generosity, he would not be here—"lord of this fair domain." He would show his gratitude to her by doing all in his power to make her visit pleasant.

He ordered his housekeeper to prepare the best suite of rooms for her; he purchased a beautiful little carriage, with a pair of ponies, as a present for her. She should drive about in the lovely Devonshire lanes, and when she returned to Seafield, take the present home with her. He remembered that she was fond of flowers, and he ordered her rooms to be filled with the rarest and choicest.

Dr. Leigh and his daughter arrived on the date fixed for their visit, the former looking old and worn, Marion bright, well, and wonderfully handsome. They reached Carrswell in the evening. Sir Laurence was standing on the terrace awaiting them. As Marion Leigh came slowly toward him, he wondered again why that presentiment of trouble weighed so heavily upon him. The doctor was unfeignedly pleased to see him.

"What a splendid place you have here, Sir Laurence!" he said; and Marion looked at him with a smile.

"Do you remember," she said, "how Miss Thornton would always declare that you were a prince in disguise? She would be quite sure of it if she were to come here. I can not imagine what you felt," she added, "in exchanging Seafield House for this. It must have seemed to you very strange at first."

"I was so much engrossed at first with Sir Rudolph," he replied, "that I hardly noticed it."

They were standing in the great entrance-hall now, and though Marion was somewhat awed by the magnificence that surrounded her, she made no sign.

"I did not know," she said, "that Carrswell was such an ancient place. It seems a strange thing that you—the heir of all this—should have lived with us."

"If only one of Sir Rudolph's sons had lived, it would never have been mine," he replied.

She was looking at him with thoughtful eyes. When he lived at Seafield House, he had, with the exception of that one night, been so perfectly indifferent to her. She had considered him as so infinitely beneath her that she had really never noticed what a handsome young fellow he was.

She looked at the tall figure, with its easy grace, and at the fair handsome face, with something of surprise.

"You have changed," she said, slowly; "you are taller, and you look much older."

He was just a little amused and a little flattered.

Throughout that evening Marion was very quiet; nothing could have been kinder or more cordial than their reception, yet she felt further apart from him than she had ever done before.

"I wonder," she said to herself, more than once, "if he remembers?"

The doctor was thoroughly delighted—the capital dinner, the choice wines, his favorite fruit, all put him into the most excellent humor.

"I really should not mind being heir to an estate like this," he said. "What a wonderful change, Laurie!"

"Papa," interposed Marion, "you forget."

"No, my dear, I do not forget," he replied. "I am not going to stand on ceremony with my young friend here."

"That is right, doctor," said Sir Laurence, heartily. "I like to hear my old name again."

Marion was looking at him calmly, thoughtfully; but he could not fathom the expression of those dark eyes—he could not tell what they meant; but there was something in them that startled him, why, he knew not. He felt that it would be some little relief if she would talk, laugh, look tired or bored—anything rather than watch him in that cool, deliberate way.

CHAPTER VII.

"LAURENCE, this is a fine place—a fine place, indeed," remarked the doctor, the next morning, as he stood on the terrace, with a cigar. "What would your father have said, I wonder, had he known of the goodly heritage in store for you?"

"I wish my father and mother had both lived to enjoy it themselves," the young man answered, with a sigh. "After all, though it is very splendid, it is very lonely."

"You can soon remedy that evil," said the doctor. "You have a beautiful house; it will not be difficult to find a beautiful wife."

“Found already!” thought the young baronet; and his heart gave a sudden bound of joy, as for one moment he was back in thought under the shadow of the chestnut-tree, and saw a fair, blushing face raised to his.

“That is what you want now,” the old doctor went on—“a beautiful young wife; and, were I in your place, I should hasten to secure one.”

Marion was leaning on the balustrade of the terrace, watching the fountains below. When her father spoke, she raised her head and looked at Sir Laurence—a calm, thoughtful gaze, but one that made him shudder. He could not think what had come over him, that whenever he met those keen, clear eyes of hers he trembled. Marion was kind enough. She never made the faintest allusion to the secret between them—it seemed to be obliterated from her mind; but there was something in that cold, steady, thoughtful glance which made him uneasy.

“No man’s life is complete,” continued the doctor, harping still on the same string, “until he is married. Look out for a wife, Laurence.”

The young man laughed a little nervously—he would have been more at his ease but for those dark eyes watching him.

“The idea is worth consideration,” he replied, trying to speak lightly.

Then, anxious to change the subject—anxious that Marion should withdraw her attention from him—he proposed that they should go to see the pony-carriage.

“I should like you to try the ponies this morning,” he said to Marion.

When they had duly admired the little carriage and all its pretty appointments, Marion looked up at him with shining eyes.

“Did you really buy this expressly for me?” she asked.

“If you will do me the favor to accept it,” he said.

“I shall both value and enjoy it,” she replied. “I will not attempt to thank you for it—it is a valuable and beautiful present. Papa, shall we be able to find room for it at Seafeld House?”

“We will try, my dear,” the doctor answered.

There was something in his daughter’s manner that even he did not understand. Marion drove out that same morning with a groom in attendance—drove along the

sweet Devonshire lanes; but on her face there was no keen appreciation of the beauties of nature. Some great thought evidently occupied her mind. More than once she said to herself, with a long, deep-drawn sigh:

“Dare I do it? and, if I do it, will it succeed? It will be total success or total failure. Dare I—”

She gazed straight before her, lost in speculation, her lips closed and set; and one, looking at her just then, would have thought her capable of anything, so determined was the expression of her countenance.

“Dare I?” she asked herself, as she drove through the magnificent park, where the antlered deer were browsing.

“Dare I?” she asked herself again, as she drove into the court-yard, where attentive servants awaited her.

* * * * *

One morning, when the doctor expected some important letters from Seafield, Sir Laurence asked Marion to open the post-bag. She did so, and assorted the letters. There were several for the young baronet, and among them lay a small white, thick envelope, from which came a faint odor of violets; the handwriting was evidently that of a lady. As Miss Leigh gave it to Sir Laurence, she watched him closely. She saw that when his eyes fell upon it his face flushed hotly. He opened the other letters and read them—this one he put aside. Even as he did so, he said to himself he wished Marion would not look at him with those cold, curious, dark eyes. The letter was from Lady Magdalen, and his heart overflowed with happiness.

In the meantime, the doctor was enjoying himself thoroughly; Sir Laurence introduced him to all the clever and scientific men in the neighborhood; he gave *recherché* little dinners in his honor; he paid him every possible attention. Marion, too, was enjoying her visit; but she had no sentimental nonsense in her mind. If in true girl-fashion she had fallen in love with her handsome young host, one would have forgiven her and liked her better for it; but to possess wealth, not love, was the ruling passion of Marion's life.

“I should like to go through the picture-gallery with you,” she said, one morning, to Laurence. “I want to see the portraits of the Ladies Carr; will you tell me the history of each one of them?”

“I am not sufficiently versed in the family annals to do

that," he replied; "but I will show you all the portraits, and tell you all I know. Will you come with us, doctor?"

"No; I am more inclined for the open air than a picture-gallery," he answered; and Marion, in her heart, thanked him.

The picture-gallery ran along the western wing of the house, and one part of it was reserved for family portraits. The young girl looked even handsomer than usual that morning. She wore a long, sweeping dress of white muslin with rose-colored ribbons, and looked as fair as any of the pictured Ladies Carr.

"Who is this?" she asked her companion, pointing to a dark, beautiful face depicted on the canvas before them.

Sir Laurence looked at the picture.

"That is Lady Anastasia Carr," he replied. "There is a romantic story attached to her; she was forced to marry one of our ancestors. She loved some one else, and died of a broken heart."

"And this?" Marion asked, looking at a lady crowned with a diadem of pearls.

Sir Laurence laughed.

"That is Lady Adelaide, the greatest heiress that ever married into the house of Carr."

"This is a beautiful picture," Miss Leigh remarked, suddenly pausing before a portrait of an imperious-looking woman. "Who is this, Sir Laurence?"

"That is Lady Barbara Carr, wife of Rupert, who lived in the time of Charles II. She was a woman of great beauty, and eagerly sought, but so proud that her lovers were frightened at her. They crowded round her, they paid her all kinds of homage, they flattered her, but no man was bold enough to say, 'Will you marry me?' She kept her lovers in order, you see, Miss Leigh."

"Rather too much so," laughed Marion.

"She never surrendered," Laurence went on—"never owned herself touched by the love of any man until Rupert Carr went to Court; and he would as soon have thought of wooing and winning a princess as of winning proud Lady Barbara; but she loved him. He would not, and did not, believe it. One day, when they were together in the gardens at Hampton Court, she gathered a beautiful, dark-red rose—do you see the rose painted in the corner of the picture—there?"

“Yes,” said Marion.

“Well, she gathered this rose, and drew his attention to it; then she looked at him with loving eyes. ‘If I carried this rose in my hand for fifty years,’ she said, ‘no man about the Court would ask me for it.’ ‘Why not?’ he questioned. ‘They think I am too proud,’ she replied. ‘I will give it to you, if you wish it,’ she added. ‘You will do me a great honor, Lady Barbara,’ he answered. She turned to him suddenly and resolutely. ‘The only man I shall ever marry,’ she said, ‘will be the man to whom I give the rose;’ and they were married.”

“Rather a strange proceeding,” said Marion. She had grown deathly white, and her dark eyes betrayed emotion. Why this story should touch her so he could not tell. She turned to Sir Laurence. “What do you think of her conduct, Sir Laurence?” she asked. “Do you consider it was unlady-like—unfeminine?”

“I have never thought about it,” he replied.

“But now that you are asked to think?” persisted Marion.

“I should say that she had a right to please herself,” answered Sir Laurence. “If, by speaking a few unconventional words, Lady Barbara made herself happy for life, I should not blame her. No one rule can fit all cases.”

“But if you knew a lady who deliberately asked a man to marry her, should you like her—respect her?”

“I can not tell—it would be unusual, it is true; but there might be good reasons for pursuing such a course.”

CHAPTER VIII.

“WOULD not you dislike her for it?”

“No; I think I should not,” he replied, indifferently.

“Dare I?” Marion asked herself again; and again she said to herself she would wait.

So they went round the gallery, Sir Laurence pointing out to her the fairest faces, telling her the stories he best remembered. They came to the last portrait, that of Lady Catherine—wife of Sir Rudolph, and mother of the four lads who had died so unexpectedly. There was a vacant space by the side of it.

“There is room for another Lady Carr,” Marion observed.

“It will be filled some day.”

It was an answer which puzzled Marion Leigh not a little.

It was a beautiful moonlit night. The day had been a busy one. Sir Laurence had driven his guests to Mossdale, where they had visited the principal shops; and soon after they had returned home the doctor asked to see the famous Carrswell rubies. Sir Laurence brought them out, and the doctor was loud in his praise of the magnificent jewels; but Marion said little, though her face was expressive. She took up a necklace.

“These rubies would not look well on a fair woman,” she said; “they would suit a brunette much better.”

The doctor laughed. Sir Laurence thought of the fair girl they were meant to adorn; and Marion fastened the necklace round her throat; then she put the bracelets on her arm and the stars in her dark hair.

“They certainly do suit you remarkably well, Marion,” said the doctor.

Miss Leigh looked long and steadfastly at her own reflection in the great mirror; then a resolute expression came over her face.

“I dare,” she said to herself, “and I will. The rubies have inspired me.”

When dinner was over, and the doctor was enjoying his cigar, Marion went up to Sir Laurence.

“Ever since I have been here,” she said, “I have been longing to see the gardens by moonlight, and there has never, I think, been a moon like this to-night. Will you take me?”

“With the greatest pleasure,” he replied. “Will you come now?”

“Yes,” she said, and she placed her hand on his arm.

They strolled into the rose-garden. A statue of Flora stood in the midst of the roses, and a garden-chair was placed against it. Marion declared herself fatigued, and sat down, drawing her black lace shawl round her shoulders. The moonlight, the sweet-scented air, the hundreds of blooming roses, the lovely scene that lay around them, made it a paradise. Sir Laurence did not talk much. Marion, too, was silent for some minutes. She hesitated, as a diver might pause on the brink before he makes a perilous plunge. She was about to gain or lose all.

“Do you remember, Sir Laurence,” she said, slowly, “the story you told me about Lady Barbara Carr?”

“Yes; I remember it well,” he replied, wondering a little why Marion should revert to that subject now.

Marion rose slowly from her seat. She went to one of the rose-trees, and gathered a red rose; he saw her strip away the thorns and arrange the leaves; he saw the dew shining on the petals of the flower; then she walked slowly up to him, and stood before him, the red rose in her hand.

“You remember the story you told me?” she repeated, holding the flower out to him. “Suppose that I were the beautiful Lady Barbara, and you Sir Rupert Carr, would you have the rose from me on the same condition as he took it?”

Her breath came hard and fast as she uttered the last few words; her face grew deathly pale. She held the flower out to him, but he did not take it. Instead of that, he sprung from his seat, pale and agitated.

“I do not understand you,” he said, hurriedly; he was taken so utterly by surprise he was at a loss what to say. He thought she had spoken on a foolish impulse, and wanted to give her time to recollect herself. “I do not understand,” he repeated.

The dark eyes did not droop before the wonder in his; more determination crept into them.

“How shall I make my meaning clear?” she said. “Lady Barbara gave the red rose to the man she wished to marry—I give you this.”

Again he made no effort to take it; but she held it still before him.

“You said yourself that no one rule could apply to every case,” she continued. “I know the rule is for a man to make a woman an offer of marriage; in my case the rule does not apply.” He made no answer—he was dazed and bewildered. “You told me once,” she went on, “that whatever grace or favor I asked from you, you would grant it, let it be what it might. I want to be mistress of Carrswell. I have not spoken without thought,” Marion went on. “Great as my claim upon you is, I should not urge it in the face of great obstacles. If I were old, or—or ugly, uneducated, vulgar, I should not dream of it; but I am young and handsome; I am as well educated and as well bred as you are yourself; no man need

be ashamed of me. I should make a suitable mistress for Carrswell and a suitable wife for you. I have thought it well over, and I see no obstacle."

"There is one great and insuperable obstacle," he replied, in a low, clear voice. "I do not love you."

"That does not matter," she said; "neither, in the sentimental sense of the word, do I love you. We shall not require love; we shall have plenty of money—everything that our hearts most desire."

"Your ideas do not accord with mine," Sir Laurence said, slowly.

Miss Leigh heeded not his words.

"Will you take this rose, Sir Laurence?" she asked, still determined to gain her end if possible.

"I can not," he answered.

"I can understand that you feel a little startled," she said; "the idea is new to you, but it is old to me—take some little time to think it over. I do not believe that you would ever regret making me your wife; I should bear my honors well, and if there were not much love between us at the outset, we should always be on friendly terms; and in time we might grow to love each other very much."

"It is impossible," he cried—"quite impossible! Do not say one word more."

"I—I have a claim upon you," she urged.

"I know it," he murmured; and in his own heart he cried: "My sin has found me out!"

She drew a little nearer to him, and held out the red rose to him; the perfume from it reached him, and he hated the scent of roses ever afterward.

"Will you take it?" she asked.

"No, I will not," he replied.

"It is the price of my silence—the price of your secret, Sir Laurence."

"I will not take it; I will not touch it."

Slowly, leaf by leaf, she pulled the beautiful rose to pieces, and threw the petals on the ground.

"Walk over them," she said; "and just as easily shall I tread under foot all your resistance—just as easily shall I bring down your pride, and—and break your heart."

"Marion," he cried, hoarsely, "this must be some cruel jest. You are so proud yourself that it can not be

possible you would condescend to ask any man to marry you against his will?"

"I do not look at it in that light," she responded. "I did you once a great service—I saved your life; your character, your fair fame, all that you now enjoy, you owe to me; but for me you would have been dead; in return I ask you to make me Lady Carr. Do not answer me yet—think of it; this is what I brought you out into the moonlight to say, and I have said it. Let us go back again now."

Neither of them spoke one word as they returned to the house.

* * * * *

"I have put my fate to the test," Marion Leigh said to herself; "and I shall win. He is caught in his own toils; I saw from his face that he knew the chain was being drawn tightly around him—he can not escape. I will secure him without threats if I can; but if I am obliged to have recourse to threats I will be in earnest. What would all his wealth and grandeur be worth to him if any one knew that he had once stolen fifty pounds?"

At any cost, Marion Leigh made up her mind to be Lady Carr, of Carrswell; as for being in love with the handsome young baronet, she neither cared for nor thought of it. She wanted to be mistress of that grand inheritance. She had a claim upon him—let him respond to it, or take the consequences.

Marion slept soundly that night; she felt that she was safe. Sir Laurence never closed his eyes—to him this was the most terrible blow that could have fallen upon him. The old horror and shame, remorse and regret, pressed upon him.

"It is the price of my silence, and your secret," she had said; and he dared not ask himself what the words meant. He resolved to speak out boldly to her, and tell her the whole truth—that he loved some one else, and could not marry her. He would see her the first thing in the morning and tell her.

Marion could not fail to observe how ill and worn Sir Laurence looked in the fresh morning light; but, although she pitied him, she never relented from her purpose. During breakfast he asked her if she would have a walk in the park with him later on. The doctor smiled when he

heard the proposal; in his opinion the young baronet was falling deeply in love with Marion, and a very stately mistress she would make, he thought, for Carrswell.

"I want to talk to you, Marion," said Sir Laurence, without any circumlocution, when they stood under the oak-trees in the park. "I want to tell you something. You wish me, in consideration of the great service you once rendered me, to marry you?"

She bowed in assent.

"Last night I was too startled and—and embarrassed to know what to say; this morning I wish to tell you the truth. I can not marry you, for I love some one else."

"That is a very feeble reason," she returned, coolly; "every one goes through some experience of that kind, I suppose. As I told you, love is not essential in our case."

"But, Marion, you would not surely marry a man who loved another woman?"

"Frankly speaking," she said, "I would do anything to be mistress of Carrswell."

"But marriage without love is monstrous!" he urged.

"It is all the same thing six months after marriage, whether you marry for love or not," she answered, quietly.

"This fitful fever men call love is, at the best, but of brief duration."

"What if I tell you that my heart, my faith, my love, and my life are pledged?"

"I will speak as plainly as you," she responded. "You must break your pledge. You know the price of my silence."

"What if I tell you that my life will be accursed to me unless I marry the woman I love?"

"That is all nonsense," she replied; "you will be happy in time with me."

This, then, was the bitter, horrible price he had to pay for his sin. The more he thought of it, the more terrible it was to him; all the gratitude that he had once felt toward Marion died in that hour. He did not love her—he loved Magdalen d'Este with all his heart. Ah! what a web he had woven for himself; in what a terrible dilemma had his crime placed him! But for that one fatal error, how happy he would have been! Still, he could not quite realize it—he could not believe that Marion would persist in her demand to be made Lady Carr—he had not realized

as yet the strength of her resolution or the greatness of her ambition.

Up to this time she had used no threats; she had merely brought forward her claim and had taken her stand on the justice of it. But as the days passed by, and Sir Laurence made no sign of yielding, Marion determined to play her last card.

The doctor had spoken more than once of going home; and his daughter, looking round on all the luxuries her soul loved, decided that they should not remain long away from Carrswell—she felt that she had a claim on all; why should she give them up?

“Sir Laurence,” she said, one morning, “did you hear what papa said about leaving here? I should like to know your decision before we go.”

“I can come but to one decision, Marion,” he answered, gravely; “I can make no other—if you loved me, I should thank you for the honor you did me—thank you for what I should feel to be a great compliment; but you have acknowledged yourself that there is no question of love, you simply wish to reign over this place, and I decline to permit you to do so—most emphatically I decline the proposition you have made to me, for once and for always.”

“You have thought the matter well over?” she questioned.

“There was little need for reflection,” he responded. “I love another woman, and I am pledged to her; how, then, can I marry you?”

“By consulting your best interests and breaking your pledge,” she replied. “I do not know who it is that you love—I do not wish to know; but, if it be one of your set, she will not marry you if your secret should be made known.”

He grew white even to his lips. That was doubtless true; Lady Magdalen d’Este knew him as an honorable man; if she heard that he had once stolen fifty pounds, the chances were that she would never care to see him again.

“You could not surely be so base as to betray me?” he cried. “It is not in human nature.”

“I do not wish to be base, as you term it, unless you drive me to it,” she rejoined. “Your secret will always

be safe with me if you will make it my interest to keep it."

"You mean if I purchase your silence at the expense of my own honor and the ruin of my life's happiness?"

"Your honor will not be worth much to you unless that past escapade of yours is kept a secret," she said. "Men recover from many blows; no one ever recovers from—"

"The brand of theft," he interrupted. "I know what you would say, Marion."

"You should not force me to say such things. Why not agree to my terms?"

"Because they are impossible," he said, hotly. "How can you ask me? Being a woman, you should be womanly."

"I am," she returned, cynically.

"You are not," he cried, as his thoughts reverted to the woman he loved; "no woman worthy of the name would make her knowledge of a sin or folly the means of carrying out such plans as yours."

"Then I must be content to remain unwomanly in your eyes, Sir Laurence," she said, coolly, "for I shall not cease to urge my claim. I shall never cease to wish to be Lady Carr. I look upon it that it was my good fortune that placed this card in my hands; you could not expect me to lay it down without playing it."

"Marion," he asked, "have you no pity for me? You are not cruel by nature. I think you can scarcely realize what you are asking of me."

"I am sorry for you," she replied; "but my heart is set upon gaining my desire. I thought you would have more sense than to raise so much opposition. I may as well tell you frankly that I intend to have my way. It would have been better if it could have been managed without threats, pleasantly and in a friendly fashion; if it can not, however, I shall not hesitate to use my power."

"Tell me the worst I have to expect," he said, moodily.

"I will," rejoined Marion, calmly. "If you make me Lady Carr, all will be well; and, from the moment you give me your promise to marry me, I will never make any allusion to your past. If you should be so ill-advised as to refuse my request, I shall at once make your secret known. I shall first tell my father—"

"He would take no notice of it; it is so long ago," cried Sir Laurence.

"All the same, it would be made public, and it is the publicity which would be your ruin. If you drove me to desperate measures, do you know what I should do?"

"I am prepared to hear anything," he replied.

"I should bring an action for breach of promise of marriage against you—not that you have ever promised me marriage; but it would be the only way in which I could bring out the story."

"And you would do this?" he said, looking earnestly at her.

"If you will not make me mistress of Carrswell, certainly," she replied. "Let me show you all that lies before you. I can most fully prove the theft; I have all the papers. I have the receipt for the money I lent you. I have the letter you wrote to me when you returned that money, in which you thanked me for having saved your honor and your life."

"Do you know," he said, slowly, "that you are making me hate you as I have never hated any one in my life?"

"I do not mind that," she answered, calmly. "Love or hatred, it is a matter of indifference to me, so long as I am Lady Carr."

He muttered something between his teeth, words not pleasant to hear.

"You have said a great deal about the honor of the Carrs," she continued. "It would be a nice thing, would it not, for the head of the house to be proved a thief? Do you think, if ever that story were known, you would be invited into any respectable house? Where would be your bright prospects then, Sir Laurence, where your future? of what use your fortune and your title, when it was known that you stole fifty pounds from the father, and borrowed it from the daughter to repay?"

CHAPTER IX.

SIR LAURENCE CARR was alone in his own room. How the long, weary days had passed since that conversation with Marion Leigh, he could not tell. The doctor had fixed the time for his departure, and Marion was quite determined to settle matters before she went away. She

would have nothing vague, nothing underhand. She must have Sir Laurence's promise to marry her, or she would at once commence her threatened exposure.

"I will leave you still a few days in which to make up your mind," said Marion, the evening before their departure, "and you can write to tell me your decision. My father thinks you are in love with me, so that I shall have a firm ally in him."

It was indeed a relief to the baronet to be alone once more. Marion's presence had grown hateful to him; and now, in the solitude of his own room, an idea occurred to him of escaping from his difficulties. It was not himself that Marion cared for, she wanted Carrswell—wealth—a title; but what if, in lieu of this, she would accept a large sum of money and leave him free? He wished that he had mentioned that to her. It was not too late; he would go and see her, hear what she said to the proposition. So, in his distress and despair, he went to Seafield, never dreaming that that would confirm in the mind of every person the idea that he was in love with Marion.

"I want to see Marion," he said, abruptly, to the doctor. "I have only an hour or two to remain here, and I came purposely to see her."

"He evidently intends to make her an offer," said the doctor to himself.

When Sir Laurence found himself alone with Marion, he looked worn and haggard; the face, that should have been bright with youth and hope, was lined with pain. She stood before him, calm, cool, and calculating.

"You have come to your senses, Sir Laurence," she said. "I am glad to see you."

"I have come to make you a proposition," he answered, "one I hope you will accept. You must forgive me for saying that the idea of a marriage with you is so utterly distasteful to me that I would rather part with half my fortune than be driven into it. On the other hand, I dread the exposure which you threaten so much that I am willing to make any sacrifice other than that you demand rather than incur it. If you will forego your resolution, therefore, and leave me free, I will give you half of my fortune, and with that you may do much better than by marrying me."

She stood for a few moments irresolute.

"I think we will let matters remain as they are," she said then. "I should lose, not gain, by accepting your offer; my marriage with you secures for me at one step all that I need."

"And takes from me all that I most value," he cried.

"That is unfortunate, I admit," she rejoined, coldly; "but it can not be helped."

He looked at her with scorn and contempt.

"So you absolutely decide," he said, "upon forcing me into this marriage on which I look with loathing?"

"Yes; I must do the best I can for myself, and this seems to me the best. You have really played into my hands by coming here to see me; there can be but one interpretation placed upon your visit. I do not ask for this marriage until the year of mourning is over. I shall tell my father that our marriage is to take place in the spring; if you draw back then, I will publish your story, and every one will see what manner of man you really are."

"Do you know, Marion, that, if you force me into this marriage, I shall positively hate you?"

She smiled carelessly.

"I am willing to run the risk of that," she answered.

"You made your conditions," he said; "listen to mine. You force me into a marriage I hate; but I swear before Heaven, except in name, you shall be no wife of mine. The same roof may cover us, for the wretched farce of keeping up appearances must be gone through, but the greatest stranger in the land will be more to me than you shall ever be. A wife you will be, but not beloved and esteemed, cherished, and cared for; on the contrary, you will be loathed, despised, and hated. Such a prospect can have but little charm, even for you."

"I shall be mistress of Carrswell," she answered, still serenely. "Besides, you will forget all that nonsense in time."

"From the time I marry you until the hour in which either you or I die, I shall hate and detest you," he went on, hotly. "You have blighted and ruined my life. No word shall ever pass my lips to you, except those I am compelled to speak. Will you—you who ought to have a woman's pride and a woman's spirit—will you consent to such a marriage as this?"

"Yes," she replied. "I am content; and as for you—why, you will see things differently after a time."

"If this miserable farce is to go on," he said, "I shall go abroad until the marriage takes place. On my return I will meet you in London, where the ceremony shall be performed in the most private manner."

"I shall be quiet satisfied," Marion answered, cheerfully.

They parted without another word. Sir Laurence did not even stop to bid the doctor adieu.

"Let them think and say what they like," he cried, recklessly; "it can not hurt me!"

* * * * *

Once more the earl and countess were at Swanscourt. The first news they heard after their arrival was that Sir Laurence Carr had gone to Egypt. The earl was the first to hear it, and he hastened home to tell the news. The countess and Lady Magdalen were sitting on the lawn, Lady Norwich reading, Lady Magdalen, with a happy smile on her face, waiting for him who was to come no more.

He would soon be here now; and when he came he would ask her to be his wife. The weight of her own gladness seemed more than she could bear. She heard a footstep; but she dared not look up.

This was a bitter-sweet moment in Magdalen's life. She heard a step, but dared not raise her happy eyes, lest the love hidden in them should be plainly seen. The step drew nearer and nearer; then the earl spoke, and she knew it was her father, not her lover, who stood beside her.

"I have heard such strange news," he said—"news that has quite disappointed me."

"What is it?" asked the countess, languidly.

"Sir Laurence Carr has gone to Egypt; and the most annoying thing is that he went only a few days ago. He might have deferred his departure a little longer, to say good-bye to us."

"Perhaps he will not be long away," said the countess.

"One does not go to Egypt for a day or two," returned the earl. "I am really sorry."

"Why has he gone?" asked Lady Norwich.

"I can not quite make out; no one seems to know. I

hear that he has been looking exceedingly ill for some time past."

"The change will do him good," said the countess; "but it is rather strange that he should have gone away without leaving any kind of farewell message for us." The languor was suddenly replaced by the liveliest concern as she sprung from her seat. "Oh, look—look at Magdalen!" she cried; and the earl saw that his daughter, the very pride and delight of his life, was lying back in the chair senseless.

"It must be the heat," said Lady Norwich; but the earl muttered some strong words between his teeth.

The next morning a letter came for Lady Magdalen, and she knew the handwriting the moment her eyes fell upon it. It was from Sir Laurence, written and posted the day before he left England. She opened and read it, the death-knell of all her sweet hopes and love.

"If I could see you," it began—"if I could tell you all that is in my heart, I should be happier and less desperate. As I write to you, my darling, your beautiful face seems to be before me. How shall I say good-bye? I have loved you with a great and everlasting love; I shall love you until I die, my last thoughts will be of you. Under Heaven there lives no man more wretched than I. There is a secret in my past life, and that secret lies in a woman's hands; to keep it from the world, I am compelled to marry her. I do not love her; I love you with my whole heart. I make no excuse for myself. I must either do what I am doing, or be the first to bring disgrace on an old and honored name.

"Darling, adieu! I am leaving England because I am unworthy to see you or speak to you again."

When she laid that letter down, Lady Magdalen d'Este knew that her own happiness was wrecked also.

If Lord or Lady Norwich ever guessed the unhappy secret of their beloved child, they never alluded to it. They loved her, if possible, better than before, they cherished her more tenderly, but they never spoke of Sir Laurence.

In the following spring a strange marriage took place in the church of St. Clement Danes, in London. The bridegroom was a fine, handsome, fair-haired man, whose face

was white, haggard, and marked with deep lines, whose eyes were filled with despair. He did not look at the girl he married when he put the ring on her finger; he shuddered as his hand touched hers. The bride was young and beautiful; but she did not receive the least attention from the bridegroom. There were no bride-maids, and the only witnesses of that sunless, joyless wedding were the bride's father and the old pew-opener. There were no carriages, no congratulations; never was wedding so dismal.

When the ceremony was over, the bride's father bid the young pair adieu. He was puzzled and perplexed; but as neither Sir Laurence nor his wife chose to enlighten him as to the reason of their strange conduct, he maintained a discreet silence; and when he returned to Seafield every one there noticed how little Dr. Leigh said about his daughter.

CHAPTER X.

DURING their stay at the Hôtel Meurice, in Paris, Sir Laurence read a paragraph in one of the English daily papers that blanched his face and made his strong frame tremble. He had been married nearly two months then. The paragraph contained the intelligence that the Earl and Countess of Norwich were leaving Swanscourt on account of the delicate health of Lady Magdalen d'Este, whom the doctors had ordered to a warm climate after her serious illness. That was all; but he knew how to read between the lines; he knew why she had been ill—why the gentle heart had failed.

Hot words rose to his lips, fierce thoughts possessed his brain, and then he had to remind himself that, after all, it was but the consequence of his crime. It was of no use blaming any one else. He had sinned, and he must pay the penalty.

Lady Carr was very happy after her own fashion; all the disagreeableness of the situation was lost upon her. She treated her husband with good-humored forbearance; she never made the least advances to him; she never sought in any way to win a loving word from him; she quite ignored his wretchedness.

“He will come to his senses by and by,” she would say; and in the meantime she enjoyed herself. They remained

for some months at the Hôtel Meurice, for the gay and brilliant life of Paris delighted her. She was never wearied of it. They had the best-appointed suite of rooms in the hotel, a luxurious carriage, and fine horses. She wore the most elegant dresses and magnificent jewelry. She was Lady Carr, of Carrswell; and, if her husband never addressed her, save when he was compelled to do so, never went out with her, treated her with coldness and indifference such as he never showed to strangers, it mattered little to her. Lady Carr had the *entrée* into the best circles in Paris; she was fêted and flattered. At first there was some little wonder expressed that she was never seen out with Sir Laurence; but the gay Parisians never stopped to inquire into the eccentric ways of an Englishman.

Lady Carr disarmed all suspicion by the good-humored, careless manner in which she spoke of her husband.

He did not care for gayety, he disliked balls, he had no passion for music; the impression she gave of him was that he was a sullen, almost morose man, and, as she was a handsome, elegant woman, her version was accepted.

When they had thoroughly "done" Paris, they went to Italy, where they remained for nearly a year. Sir Laurence would not go back to Carrswell. It seemed to him almost a sacrilege to take Marion to reign there as mistress; and, as the time passed by, a strange thing happened. Lady Carr, who had prided herself on her lack of sentiment, who had declared that affection between herself and Sir Laurence was a matter of perfect indifference when she had entered into the compact for her marriage—this cynical, haughty, cold woman learned to love her husband with all the strength of her proud, passionate heart.

It was then that the real torture and the great misery of his life began; he was by nature courteous and gentle to all women, and it was difficult for him always to repulse his wife; it would have been difficult for any man. The first time she came to him and laid her hand caressingly on his head, he was astonished.

"What beautiful hair you have, Laurence!" she said, quietly. He rose haughtily and drew himself away from her.

"You must not forget our contract," he returned, curtly. "It does not admit of compliments."

She took courage at last, and one morning—they were

staying in Florence then, at an English hotel, and he sat in the balcony, reading the English papers and smoking his cigar—she went to him and laid one arm round his neck. If a serpent had touched him, he could not have started more violently.

“Laurence,” she faltered, “I—I want you to be friends with me.”

Most men would have been attracted by her beauty—she wore a dress of pale amber, half shrouded in black lace, and a little bunch of pansies at her throat; her handsome face was softened into tenderness, her large dark eyes were brilliant.

“Laurence, let me speak to you,” she went on. “We have been married more than a year now, and you have never spoken one kind word to me yet. I want to ask you if we could not be friends.”

“I am as friendly as I can be with you,” he said, coldly.

“But, Laurence, even if you could not love me—could you not like me a little more than you do now?” she pleaded.

“No,” he answered, sternly; “when you forced me to marry you, I told you that I hated and loathed you as surely as man never hated woman before. You persisted in marrying me after that. You were content then with the terms of our marriage—you must be content now.”

“But,” she said, gently, “everything is changed. In those days I thought of nothing but how grand it would be to be called Lady Carr, of Carrswell—I did not know even what love meant. Now—oh, Laurence, I never dreamed that this pleasure and this pain would come to me—now I love you!”

His face hardened.

“When you forced me into this wretched bondage,” he said, “I loved the fairest and sweetest woman upon earth. I had to give her up for you—you will understand now, perhaps, what torture I suffered.”

She looked at him with wistful eyes.

“I wish you would forgive me, Laurence. It was a mean and contemptible thing to do—a base betrayal of your trust—but Carrswell and the position were too much for me. I wish,” she said, gently, “you would forgive me and try to like me a little. When I see how happy

other wives are in their husbands' love, I—long to be loved."

"You will never be loved by me," he answered, in a cold, clear voice. "Do not let me hear another word on this subject. You have blighted and ruined my life; I can not forget that."

But she went on.

"I love you now, Laurence. If the time were to come over again, I—I should act differently."

"It is too late for regret, too late to undo the past," he interrupted. "You were quite willing that we should marry in hate, and not in love; let it be so. I repeat, do not speak to me on this subject again."

After that she grew desperate, as women who are scorned will do; her jewels and dresses, all the luxuries that she had so dearly prized, palled upon her. She cared no longer for gayety and pleasure, she cared only to win her husband's love. She grew thin and pale. Still her husband, whom every one liked and loved, was cold and hard as adamant to her, even hated her. She read dislike in the blue eyes that would never meet her own, in the scornful curve of his lips. Once she knelt down by his side, and, with passionate tears, murmured:

"Forgive me, and love me a little, Laurence."

"I liked you better when you told me frankly you wanted Carrswell, and not me, than I like you now," he returned, frigidly.

"Will you always be hard and cruel?" she asked—"always?"

"You have that for which you bargained," he rejoined; "you are Lady Carr—mistress of Carrswell. You knew my heart and my love had gone from me when you forced me into this marriage."

As the days sped on, and Sir Laurence remained the same—cold, unheeding, unforgiving—she grew madly jealous. She watched him, followed him; she wept and wrung her hands in despair. She hated every woman to whom he spoke a kind word. In a furious passion of jealousy, she said to him one day:

"You told me you loved a woman once. If ever I find her, I will kill her."

"You have almost killed her," he answered, sadly. "She had little life apart from me."

She turned from him, deathly pale, stricken dumb.

One evening, as she stood in the hall of the hotel, Sir Laurence came in. The landlord was there; and, with a complacent smile, he said to Sir Laurence:

"We have another English party, Sir Laurence; an earl and his wife, with their daughter."

Marion had gone up to her husband's side—not that she hoped he would speak to her, but because she could not keep away from him; she heard what the landlord said, and felt interested.

"Who are they?" asked the baronet.

The landlord placed the visitors' book in his hands.

"See, Sir Laurence," he said—"the Earl and Countess of Norwich and Lady Magdalen d'Este."

The book fell from Sir Laurence's hand, and he staggered back, like a man who had received a blow. Marion gave a little cry, and he recovered himself in a moment.

"I am surprised," he said, in a low, hoarse voice—"startled and surprised. The earl and countess are neighbors and friends of mine."

Marion could not fail to observe his intense agitation. Her suspicions were aroused. She looked again at the visitors' book—was it possible that Lady Magdalen d'Este was the girl he loved? Blind, furious jealousy took possession of her as she went slowly from the hall back to her own room.

"That is the woman he loves," she said to herself, "and I vowed, if ever I found her, I would kill her."

The remembrance of her husband's white face and his intense emotion made her almost desperate. The same evening, when she saw him alone in their salon, she went up to him again. She knelt down before him, and stretched out her arms to him with a yearning cry.

"Love me, Laurence," she said, as the passionate tears fell like rain. "Love me, Laurence. Do you know that I would give all I have in this world—that I would give even life itself—for one kiss from your lips?"

He looked at her coldly.

"Do you know," he replied, "that by your ambition and your avarice you have spoiled three lives?" and he left her there.

There was no avoiding a meeting; the earl and countess expressed a moderate degree of pleasure at seeing Sir Laurence, and inquired after his wife; but he made no offer to introduce her. Lady Magdalen was not well, and kept her room. They would only remain two days, and then they were going in Lord Sylvester's yacht for a cruise.

Only two days! Sir Laurence, however, made up his mind that he would see Lady Magdalen once more. He was so unutterably wretched, he hated the weary burden of his life so intensely, he cared little how long it lasted. Marion, loving, jealous, despairing, was a hundred times more revolting and horrible to him than Marion brisk, careless, and indifferent.

Seeing Lady Magdalen would be like a glimpse of heaven; she who was so sweet, so gentle, so good, might perhaps tell him what to do. Half an hour with her would change the whole current of his life. He would not write to her, he would not ask for an interview; but he would wait for her. She would be sure to come out on the terrace in the evening; he would await her there. And, just as he decided on watching for Lady Magdalen, his wife decided on watching him, and, if he kissed the hand of this woman, whom intuitively she knew he loved, she would be revenged. She watched him keenly, but in vain. He certainly wrote no note and sent no message; but her instinct told her that he intended to see Lady Magdalen d'Este.

"They will talk about me," she said. "He will tell her how unhappy he is, how much he dislikes me, and she will sympathize with him."

A fierce flame of jealousy burned in her heart. All day she watched, but Sir Laurence never left his room; he dined late, he said little, he seemed lost in thought.

"He is thinking of her," said the unhappy woman to herself—"only of her."

Toward evening the Earl of Norwich sent to ask if Sir Laurence would join him for an hour; he was going for a walk; but the answer returned was that Sir Laurence hoped his lordship would excuse him, as he was not well.

The terrace of the hotel was long and wide and overlooked grounds that sloped down to the river. It was about ten feet high, and the balustrade did not run straight along; at intervals there was a break in it, a gap left pur-

posely to be filled with tall shrubs. It was, perhaps, slightly dangerous; but as no accident had ever occurred, danger was never thought of.

Lady Carr, watching, saw, when the evening shadows fell dark and soft, her husband go out on to the terrace; and, perhaps half an hour afterward, she saw a vision which set her heart aflame. A tall, beautiful girl, dressed in white, with a crimson flower on her breast, a black lace shawl over her head and shoulders, crossed the little side hall and went out on to the terrace.

"They will meet," Lady Carr said to herself.

She swiftly glided back through the salon, passed through one of the French windows that opened on to the end of the terrace, and was there before them. She crouched behind a tall shrub, where she could hear and see all that passed without being observed herself.

She saw them meet. Sir Laurence's face was pale and full of emotion, Lady Magdalen's was deathly white and trembling.

"I have not startled you?" he said. "You knew I was here?"

"Yes," she answered, "I knew you were here; mamma told me."

"Thank Heaven," he said, "that I see you once more; my whole soul has thirsted to be with you once again."

"I am glad to see you," she said, simply. "I knew that we must meet some day."

"I thank Heaven," he repeated, fervently, "that I have lived to see you again. Oh, Magdalen, for those few weeks of happiness I have suffered sorely! My dear, lost love, what have you thought of me?"

"I have thought of you kindly always," she returned, gently.

"You knew that I loved you?"

"Yes," with a faint blush. "You said that you had a secret in your life. It is that secret which has parted us; I knew it."

"You are right," he said; "it is. May I tell you now what that secret was? Time was when I would rather have died than that you should have known it; now I would rather that you should know what parted us, and how utterly impossible it was for me to do otherwise than I did. Will you come with me where I can find a seat for

you? You will be tired. Oh, Magdalen, do you remember that one hour under the chestnut-tree?"

"We will not think of it," she said, gently; and they moved away together, side by side, in the dark, fragrant night.

They did not hear the hushed sound of light footsteps, they did not see a white, wild face peering after them. They had forgotten Lady Carr as completely as though she did not exist. They walked on until they reached one of the seats placed against the marble balustrade. They sat down there, unconscious of being observed, unconscious of the dark eyes watching every movement.

Then Lady Magdalen spoke.

"Tell me the story of your secret. I shall be the better, the happier for knowing it."

And then he told her the story of his temptation and his fall. She listened intently. When he had finished, she laid her hand on his.

"Was that all—was that the secret which parted us?"

"Yes," he answered, sadly, "that was all."

"Dear," she said, "it was the folly of youth—scarcely a crime. At any rate, it need not have separated us."

The tall shrub a few feet behind them shook; there was a faint cry, a half-strangled call, then silence for some moments—intense, painful silence, followed by the sound of a fall; then silence again.

"What is it, Laurence?" asked Lady Magdalen, looking pale and frightened.

He rose and looked behind the shrub; there was nothing to be seen, and through the gap in the balustrade he peered down to the grounds below.

"It is nothing," he said. "Perhaps a stone has fallen, or a flower-vase; there is nothing here."

They listened for a few minutes; all was silence; not the faintest sound disturbed it.

"That need not have separated us," repeated Lady Magdalen. "Would to Heaven you had trusted me!"

There was little more to be said. Never for one moment did he forget the respect due to her. He said nothing of the love that filled his heart.

They parted that night without the hope or expectation of ever meeting in this world again.

But in the morning there was terrible consternation in

the hotel. Lady Carr was missing, and, after some little search, she was found lying dead in the grounds below the terrace. She had been dead for hours.

She had evidently fallen through the gap in the marble balustrade, for she lay just underneath, and some of the crimson flowers had fallen with her. When Sir Laurence was taken to the spot by the terrified landlord, he knew at once what had happened. His wife had watched him and followed him; then she had either taken a false step and fallen through the open space where the railing should have been, or, in her jealous despair, she had flung herself down. Whichever it was, the secret died with her.

Lady Carr was buried in the cemetery at Florence. The old doctor came to her funeral. Her marriage had been mysterious to him, her death was not less so.

The earl and countess went away with their daughter, and Sir Laurence returned to Carrswell.

Four years afterward, a little scene on the lawn there attracted the attention of Lady Magdalen Carr, the happy mother of a sturdy little son two years old. The child had gathered, in his baby fashion, a blooming red rose, and, running up to where his father sat, he thrust it into his face. Sir Laurence drew back with a startled cry. The very fragrance brought back so forcibly to him the time and the hour when Marion Leigh had stood before him holding out to him the red rose that meant so much to him.

"Never do that again, Harry," he said. "Papa hates roses."

"Papa hates roses!" lisped the boy.

Sir Laurence's thoughts went back to the woman, long dead now, who had cried out that she would give her life for one kiss from his lips. Then he went up to the wife whom he loved with a perfect love.

"It was when the woodbine was in bloom that I saw you first," he said, tenderly; "so its flowers will always be the sweetest and dearest to me."

And when she kissed his face, there was no shadow upon it.

THE END.

UNDER THE HOLLY BERRIES.

CHAPTER I.

THERE never was a more beautiful, more perfect, or colder Christmas Eve than this on which my story begins.

How I, George Rayner, a bachelor, who never voluntarily exposed myself to discomfort of any kind, came to be traveling on Christmas Eve is the story I have to tell. I had left my own house, a pretty, modern villa on Denmark Hill, and I had to reach Dene Manor House before the night ended. Dene Manor House, near the town of Queen's Lynne, was in Hampshire, and stood near the sea. It was a long journey, and not a pleasant one; but the beauty of the night will be impressed upon me until I die. All that poets have sung of Christmas Eve was faint and weak in comparison with the actual beauty of it. There had been a fall of snow during the last three days, and a hard frost during each night; the result was that the world was covered with pure white, and white snow under a dark-blue sky is one of the loveliest sights in this world so full of beauty.

Frozen snow is decidedly even more beautiful than falling snow, and these two beauties were combined this Christmas Eve. The snow of the last few days had frozen, and a fresh shower fell at intervals. How lovely those intervals were while they lasted! The moon shone bright as day, and the stars shone bright; the sky was deep dark blue and cloudless. The moonlight threw graceful shadows over the bare fields and the high-roads; it shone in the great icicles that hung from the branches of the trees and the roofs of the houses; it glistened in the hoarfrost that fringed the hedges and on the snow that lay in the laurel leaves; the wind rocked the great branches, and

chanted a grand "Hallelujah" among the tall trees. The Christmas stars shone clear and bright; Christmas music seemed to fill the air, as it always does on Christmas Eve; then, when the interval was ended, came just a colder wind. Then a cloud passed over the moon's face; one by one the stars ceased shining, until the whole sky grew dark; then the fall of the soft, white snow began, a few flakes at first, and they melted as they touched the frozen ones, then softer, thicker, larger, fuller, until the whole air was filled with them, and nothing could be seen except the thick, falling snow, blinding, piercing, yet so beautiful I could have taken it in my hands and kissed it.

I had left London when the glow and warmth and greetings of Christmas were at their height, the streets full of well-dressed, happy people, the shop windows full of Christmas dainties, the Christmas bells chiming, Christmas greetings on every lip, and now I stood alone in the deep heart of the country, amid the softly falling snow, the silence broken only by the Christmas carol that the wind would chant in the great bare trees, and the gentle whir of the snow-flakes as they fell, soft and thick.

The train stopped at the pretty, old-fashioned station of Queen's Lynne, a station that in summer is covered with the great spreading boughs of the chestnut-trees. Even as I left the carriage I could hear the rapid rush of the river Lynne singing about Christmas Eve and the stars that had been shining on its breast. I heard, too, the sweep of the wind through the Lynne woods, as it chanted of the wonders and glories of Christmas Eve. There was one solitary porter on the platform, and I was the only passenger by that train.

"The carriage from the Manor House," said the porter, touching his cap. "It is waiting, sir;" and I followed him to the great, empty station-yard. There stood the carriage, a pair of excellent horses, and a stalwart-looking coachman.

"Dene Manor House, sir," said the coachman; and the next minute it was bowling along the white, frozen, hard road, leaving behind me the rush of the river and the chanting of the wind among the pine-trees.

I can tell, in few words, what brought me from warm, cheery, smoky London to Dene Manor House. I, George Rayner, am one of the celebrated firm of Rayner & Blen-

heim, Solicitors, Lincoln's Inn Fields, London; my private residence is a pretty villa on Denmark Hill; my partner lives at Berkhamsted.

Our firm is a well-known one; our clients are, most of them, steady-going, wealthy people, who never either make or lose a lot of money, speculate, or gamble—steady country people. We could almost calculate our yearly income beforehand, knowing so well what the habits and customs of our clients are. Twenty years ago we had on our books two cousins, Dudley Beresford, a frank, handsome young man, whose predilections were all for country life, and John Ruthven, who had but one desire, and that was to join the Civil Service in India.

These cousins—both handsome young men—met frequently at our office; they, with my partner and myself, were on most friendly and intimate terms. We dined together frequently; we went together to the theater; the cousins and I went down to my partner's house at Berkhamsted. In those days they did not do much business with us; they were neither of them rich, but they considered us as family solicitors.

They were both ambitious. Dudley Beresford wanted a country-house with plenty of land lying round it; John scorned the idea of farming, or agriculture, or country life.

"India and the Civil Service for me. I shall make a fortune," he said to his cousin Dudley, "while you are looking to see if last year's seed has been sown, or whether it is coming up."

"You will never make a fortune at all," said Dudley Beresford, with grim disbelief. "You are not the kind of man who makes money."

"You will see," laughed John. "When the time comes for you to acknowledge the truth, you will say, 'John was the man to make money, after all.'"

"You may make, but you will never save it."

"You will see," laughed John; and the subject was dismissed.

That was twenty years ago, and after that we lost sight of them. We heard that Dudley Beresford had married a wife with money, had purchased a fine estate in Hampshire, and was a prosperous man. John Ruthven had entered the Civil Service and had gone to India. We did hear,

some few years afterward, that John had married in India, and that his wife died; that he had sent home a little girl to the care of his cousin, Dudley Beresford, squire of Dene Manor.

Then for many years we heard no more. Occasionally we read the name of Dudley Beresford in the papers; he was no mean politician, and there had been some mention of his going into Parliament; lately we had lost sight even of him. What was our surprise on receiving a letter from India, from one of the best firms in Madras, telling us that John Ruthven had died somewhat suddenly, and that by his own arrangement all his affairs were intrusted to us. There was among the papers a long letter from the late John Ruthven to us, telling us what a large fortune he had accumulated, and that he intended leaving all to his daughter, with the exception of ten thousand pounds, which he wished to be given to his cousin, Dudley Beresford, in return for all the kindness he had shown to his daughter, Viola Ruthven.

The letter went on to say that the writer, John Ruthven, felt that he had, to all outward appearance, neglected his daughter, but he excused himself on the ground that he was always working hard for her. He meant to make himself a millionaire, and Viola a great heiress; he meant to come home and devote himself to her; but illness had stepped in, and feeling that he was going to die, he had written this letter to his old friends, Rayner & Blenheim, and should send it, together with his will, and all the papers appertaining to his fortune, through the hands of the firm in Madras who had hitherto conducted his affairs. He begged, as a personal favor to himself, that one of the firm would go down to Dene Manor and see his daughter, and attend to her interest. To this letter of John Ruthven's was added a long letter from the Madras firm, telling how he had died. We found, on reading the will, that we, with Dudley Beresford, were the executors of the will, trustees of the property, and guardians of the girl, with a very handsome legacy left to each of us.

We were a whole day reading through that mass of papers, and when the business was ended we looked at each other in amazement at the enormous fortune acquired by John Ruthven. His daughter would certainly be one of the wealthiest heiresses in England.

"He always declared that he should be a rich man," said my partner, Mr. Blenheim. "Do you remember how the squire laughed?"

"Yes, I remember; but he has spent all his life in making money, and has had no time for enjoying it. I would rather make less and enjoy more."

"Perhaps he enjoyed making and saving as much as we should enjoy spending," said my partner. "It will be a money-making affair for us, George, but you must attend to it. Write to the squire at once—better not tell him the whole story; I do not think it would be wise. See how the land lies, see what the squire is like, what the girl is like; use your usual discretion, George."

The result of my writing to the squire, telling him that, in consequence of John Ruthven's death, I had some business matters to discuss with him, was that I received a letter in return, saying how glad the squire was to hear from me; how pleased he should be to renew an old friendship, and begging of me to combine pleasure with business, and spend a few days at Christmas with them. He added that he did not know what affairs of poor John Ruthven's could need discussion.

So here I was, on Christmas Eve, going to tell a young lady whom I had never seen, and heard of for the first time, that she was worth a quarter of a million of money. It was a pleasant errand, but a strange one. What would she be like—pretty or plain, meek or proud? I felt, although I was a middle-aged gentleman, knowing nothing of romance, that I was performing the part of an elderly fairy. I was going with a quarter of a million of money, as it were, in my hands, to give a young lady—who probably did not know that she had a penny—a quarter of a million of money!

I thought of this as I drove along the white, frozen roads. I could hear ever so faintly the chiming of the Christmas bells. I could hear at times the faint echo of music which I knew to be the waits. My heart grew bright and glad; some of my lost youth came back to me; I felt that I was further from earth and nearer to heaven than I had been for many years, as most men do on Christmas Eve; and I wondered with my whole heart what she would be like, and whether she would be worthy of the fortune I was, in a fashion, taking to her.

The carriage stopped for a few moments before the park gates, and I told the coachman I should like to walk to the house, for to my London-tired eyes there was no sight so beautiful as the moon shining on the snow and the evergreens.

CHAPTER II.

It was a long, broad, and winding walk from the park gates to the house. It was lined on either side by tall trees and masses of evergreens. Great shining laurels, their broad leaves holding little nests of snow; tall, straight firs, each one looking just fitted for a Christmas-tree; clusters of white laurestinas—surely the fairest of winter blooms. Above all, I noted a profusion of holly-trees; they were unusually large, and bore innumerable quantities of red berries; beautiful trees, with glassy green leaves, on which the white snow lay lightly, and the scarlet berries which shone like flame.

I stopped to look at them, for I had never beheld such fine holly-trees, and I heard, suddenly, to my intense surprise, the sound of a hushed sob.

Surely I must be mistaken. At some little distance I saw lights shining from the large, broad windows of the house; on the other side I saw the white, frozen waters of what I knew afterward was called the "Danesmere." There was no trace of any one, besides which, it was not probable that any one would be sobbing and weeping out here, under the holly-trees, at this time on Christmas Eve. It must have been the sigh of the wind among the trees. I saw that a narrow path led from the holly to the mere; then I went on, and in a few minutes the house lay before me, and no more gladdening sight ever met the eyes of a man. A large, old-fashioned house, the gray walls of which were covered with ivy; the windows were very large and square, and from each of them came a stream of ruddy, crimson light that seemed to warm the very snow itself.

A picture of Christmas warmth and Christmas happiness. "Light hearts and fair faces are there," I thought to myself, and suddenly, without rhyme or reason, I remembered the sound I had heard in the holly-trees. Of course it might be nothing; in all human probability it

was nothing; but I should not be quite happy without I was sure, and it would not take me two minutes to return.

I almost laughed at my own folly, but I went back, and stood quite still where I had heard the sounds before.

Ah! I was not mistaken. It came from a great holly-tree, further down on the left-hand side, and nearer to the mere. I could see nothing, but it was a woman's sob, I felt sure; again and again a great, passionate sob, as though some one's heart were breaking; not at all the sound for Christmas Eve.

The snow fell no longer in thick, white flakes—it lay frozen on the ground; the moon was shining bright as day, the stars were gleaming, the sweet mystery of Christmas Eve seemed brooding alike in the silent skies and on the white earth. Who could be hidden among the holly-trees, weeping, on the night when the very angels rejoiced, and men were full of good wishes for one another?

I went cautiously to see, scarce treading the snow under-foot, scarce bending the green boughs with their burden of white snow and red berries. I came nearer and nearer, and there, hidden by thick clusters of holly, I saw the slight, tall figure of a young girl; a thick black shawl had been thrown over her head and shoulders, but in the passionate abandonment of her grief she had thrown it aside. The beautiful head had no covering except its own coil of golden hair; the face raised in such piteous distress to the moonlit skies was as beautiful as the faces one sees only in pictures and in dreams. What a rain of tears! What bitter sobs!

“I am desolate!” she cried, “desolate on the face of the earth! No one loves me—no one cares for me!”

The words ceased suddenly. She had found out that I was there, and we stood looking in frightened silence at each other. She could not mistake me for anything but a middle-aged gentleman—I might have mistaken her for a spirit of the woods, or a fairy, only that I knew she was a mortal woman in bitter pain.

“Who are you?” she said at last, clasping two very white, pretty hands as she spoke. “Who are you?”

“Do not be afraid,” I said, gently.

“I am not afraid,” she answered. “I shall find nothing worse than that which I came to seek.”

“What did you come to seek?” I asked.

“Death!” she replied.

“Death?” I cried—“on Christmas Eve? Death, and you so young, so beautiful?”

“I think my youth and my beauty have been a curse to me,” she said, bitterly. “And why should I not die on Christmas Eve? What is Christmas Eve to me? I am the more miserable because every one else is happy. What are the Christmas stars to me, and the Christmas bells, and the evergreens? All less than nothing. When one is driven mad with intolerable pain, what are such things?”

I saw her face more plainly then, for the moon shone full upon it, and I was startled. I saw in it some resemblance, so vague that first I could not catch it, then it grew plainer to me. Wonder of wonders! The face of the girl hidden under the holly berries resembled the beautiful face of John Ruthven, as I had known him years ago. I had always considered him one of the handsomest men of my acquaintance; here was the same white, low brow, the same dark, delicate, level eyebrows, the same violet eyes, with lashes of singular beauty and length. In this case clusters of gold seemed to crown the white brow, and the mouth was just as sweet as it was proud. She must surely be John Ruthven’s daughter, or she would never be so much like him. Yet, could it be possible that the girl who was heiress to a quarter of a million of money should be longing for death because she fancied life was hard to bear?

“Who are you?” she repeated. “Why have you come here to me? I thought no one would find me. Who are you?”

“I will tell you,” I answered. “You will find it difficult to believe me, and as wonderful as it is difficult. I am, or rather I was, your father’s friend.”

“My father’s friend!” she repeated; and I saw that her interest was aroused at once. “My father’s friend! Are you quite sure there is no mistake?”

“Not if you are Viola Ruthven,” I said; and she started in wonder.

“I am Viola Ruthven,” she answered.

“Ah! then,” I replied, “there is a brighter fate in store for Viola Ruthven than coming out to seek death on Christmas Eve.”

“There can be no bright fate for me,” she said, bitter-

ly. "I am fatherless, friendless, with one exception, and to him, my only friend, I have brought more misery than anything else. I am penniless. I do not see what fate can do for me."

"How old are you?" I asked.

"Eighteen," she replied, with a dreary sigh.

"Do you not think that is too young to despair?"

"Then it should be too young to suffer," she said.

"You have not told me what brought you here."

"I came to the Manor House to see the squire on business, and I was walking from the park gates to the house, because the night was so weird-like and lovely. I heard you weeping as I passed by the holly-trees, and I came back to see what it was."

"I believe it was Heaven who sent you," she said, "for I came out to seek death. Who are you?"

There was a touch of the same graceful imperiousness which had always been a charm in John Ruthven.

"You will not know my name," I said; "I am George Rayner; long years ago your father was a friend of mine."

All the music, and tenderness, and sadness in the world was breathed into those words:

"My father's friend!"

"And I will be your friend, too, if you will allow me," I said, quickly, "for you want one, it seems to me. Now tell me, Miss Ruthven, what brought you out here under the holly berries to-night?"

"I could bear my troubles no longer," she answered; "not another moment. Are you a very religious man?" she asked suddenly; but she did not wait for an answer. "If you are," she said, "you will be shocked at me. I did not mean to be wicked, but I was so unhappy. I came out to see if I had courage to drown myself."

"Not really!" I said, with a shudder.

"Yes, really," she answered, with a faint smile. "You do not think that I should play at it, do you? I went to the mere, but it is frozen inches thick; it is a splendid block of ice. I found I had the courage, but not the means. Now I am glad I did not do it, since the world holds a friend for me. You have saved my life," she said, "because you have given me hope. I should have been dead in an hour but for you."

"Thank Heaven I came!" was my answer. "I can

assure you life holds some wonderful things for you yet, Miss Ruthven. Now will you tell me why you, so young and beautiful, are tired of life?"

"Am I beautiful?" she asked, suddenly.

"You are, indeed," was my answer.

"Are you going to stay at the Manor House?" she asked.

"Yes; for some days at least," I replied.

She drew her slender, tall figure to its full height.

"I will not tell tales," she said. "If you are going to stay there, you will very soon find out why I wish that I was dead, and you will agree with me that the fatherless, the friendless, and the penniless are better out of the world than in it."

I seized her hands in mine.

"Does no one love you," I cried; "you so young, so fair?"

A passionate blush covered her face.

"Yes," she replied, "one man does, and it is to his peril—we will not speak of it. You are going to stay there, and you will hear of all my iniquities; you will hear that I am a pauper, yet proud; that I am dependent on charity, yet ungrateful; that I have been clothed and fed, and have repaid my benefactors by—" the passionate torrent of words stopped suddenly. "I am mad to talk to you like this," she said. "You will find it all out. You will not wonder in a few days why I wish that I was dead."

I longed to tell her that in a few days more she would be envied by all the land; that she would be one of the wealthiest heiresses in it; but prudence made me refrain yet awhile. Still, I might cheer and comfort her some little.

"Miss Ruthven," I said, "I have come down ostensibly to see the squire, but really to see you."

"To see me!" she cried. "I should not have thought that any one in this world wanted to see me."

"I may tell you still more," I said; "I have some good news for you."

"Good news? It is impossible. There can not be any for me; you must be mistaken."

"I am not. I have very good news for you, which you shall hear in a few days' time; but it will be better for you

not to say that you have seen me, or that we have spoken together. When we meet, let it be as strangers."

"I will do as you say," she answered. "You might stay many days at the Manor House without seeing me, especially now."

"Why more especially now?" I asked; but she made no answer.

"Now I must go," I said; "but before I leave you, promise me that you will think of life instead of death."

"Is it worth while?" she asked, ineffable pain shining in her beautiful eyes.

"You will find it so, if you will have the patience to wait," I answered; and then I left her—thinking of the lines:

"No need for envy in this life,
No cause for quarreling and strife;
The young and old, the rich and poor,
Have each their trials to endure,
And every lot its share of joy—
Some gold as well as some alloy.

"Though some may have large share of wealth,
And others only ruddy health,
Perchance, if we the heart might read,
We'd find the poor man rich indeed,
And his rich brother very poor
In every source of pleasure pure.

"We can not see the hidden life,
Or know what troubles may be rife,
Or grief within the soul find place,
Masked to the world by smiling face;
And we need no one's burdens bear
Except our own allotted share."

CHAPTER III.

HALF an hour afterward I was in the midst of a very different scene. I met with the warmest welcome from my old friend the squire; he laughed at the change time had wrought in both of us. The squire had been a slender, handsome man twenty years ago; he was handsome still, but he had grown stout, and had lost the agility of youth. He was delighted to see me, and after I had been refreshed with every kind of Christmas cheer, he took me into the drawing-room, where all his guests were assem-

bled. How often I thought of the beautiful, despairing face under the holly berries; but of it I spoke no word.

I have read Washington Irving's sketch of "Christmas in a Country House," I have read Christmas stories without number, but I have never seen anything like the Christmas kept up at Dene Manor House.

As soon as the hall door opened a gust of warm, aromatic air greeted one, and there seemed to be a confusion of light and evergreens. The whole house was so warm, and bright, and light, there must have been fires in every room. Talk of "merry Christmas;" the very sight of the evergreens brought the tears to my eyes. I had never seen such laurel, such fir, such bunches of mistletoe. Of course it was my fancy, but it seemed to me that the grand old house fairly rocked with music and laughter. I could not look at the red berries of the holly; they brought back to me so forcibly the beautiful, despairing face of the girl who had left all the warmth, beauty, and merriment to go out to die.

The house was a perfect bower of evergreens; laurel and fir were twined everywhere, and bunches of mistletoe hung in the hall and over the grand staircases. The squire pointed to them laughingly.

"Boys and girls," he said.

Then we entered the drawing-room—a magnificent room, lofty and large, with three large windows, and two immense fire-places, two huge chandeliers, some superb pictures, a great number of flowers, and, in profusion everywhere, the Christmas evergreens.

The squire led me first to a tall, handsome lady, looking imperially proud, and seated in state on a couch of crimson velvet—a lady whose proud eyes seemed to look over every one, and to see far beyond them. She looked over me. She did not know that I, after a fashion, carried a quarter of a million of money with me. She was superbly dressed in black velvet, and wore a few diamonds. The squire introduced me to his wife, and Mrs. Beresford condescended to inquire if I had had a pleasant journey. My thoughts flew back to the snow-storm and the face under the holly berries. She was graciously pleased to add that she hoped I should enjoy myself, and then I was dismissed. The squire took me to his daughters—two fashionably dressed young ladies, very much alike—and introduced me

to them. Clarissa, the eldest, said a few words to me; Helena, the youngest, looked up, saw that I was a middle-aged man of no particular distinction, simply bowed, and did not waste a word upon me. Then the squire led me to his only son—and let me say at once that a finer, handsomer, more gallant young fellow I never met; his face was like his mother's, but while it had all her dark beauty, it lacked the pride. I was delighted with him; he welcomed me so warmly, he talked to me, he did everything in his power to show respect to his father's old friend. It was evident to me that Guy was the very pride of his father's heart. He was a barrister practicing in London, and had already made for himself a name. Gayly as he talked, however, I saw that Guy Beresford was not quite happy, not quite at his ease. There was a shadow on his face, every now and then a gleam of pain in his eyes that betrayed a mind ill at ease.

The squire introduced me to his other guests; then he seemed to look uneasily round the room. At last he said, "Clarissa," and his eldest daughter came to him. "Where is Viola?" he asked.

Clarissa gave what I considered a very decided toss of the head.

"I do not know, papa," was the abrupt reply.

"Why is she not here? Christmas Eve! We ought all to be happy together," said the squire.

"I think," said Clarissa, with a half glance at me, "it would be difficult for any one to be very happy with Viola."

"Why is she not here?" repeated the squire.

"I do not know. She went out in the sulks some time ago. I have not seen her since."

Then he crossed the room and went to his wife.

"Louisa," he said, "where is Viola, and why is she not here?"

"I do not know," she replied. "The girl is insupportable since her father's death."

The words went through my heart like a knife.

"But what is the matter to-night? Why is she not in the room?"

"It was not likely that I should permit her to join us after what has passed. I told her quite plainly that until

she knew her place among us, she must keep ner own room."

"Surely not on Christmas Eve?" said the compassionate squire.

"On Christmas and every other eve," said Mrs. Beresford, impatiently. "That is enough, Dudley. Viola does not enter the drawing-room to-night."

"It is too bad," murmured the squire, as we went away from the couch. "I wonder, old friend," he said to me, "who among us understands women?" And I could not tell him.

By that time I had pretty accurately formed my notion of my old friend's domestic affairs. His wife was a proud, handsome shrew, his daughters neither handsome nor particularly amiable, his son one of the most noble and gallant of young men. I wondered what were his feelings over his cousin.

"Every man has a skeleton in his closet," said the squire. "If you stay here long enough, you will discover mine."

He seemed very uneasy, and I heard him ask several people if they had seen Viola; the answer was always, "No."

"Excuse me a few minutes, Rayner," said the squire; and I knew that he had gone in search of Viola. While he was absent, I looked round that spacious and beautiful room with admiration. What a happy Christmas party! There was music, conversation, round games, varied with cards and dancing.

I thought of the beautiful face I had seen under the holly berries, and how it would have shone fairest of all.

Then the squire returned, but there was with him no Viola. He came straight up to me—the young people had just begun dancing.

"George," he said, "come and talk to me for a few minutes."

I went to him. I could see that in the midst of all his magnificence and luxury he was not happy—not even on Christmas Eve.

"You have come over about poor John Ruthven's affairs?" he said.

"Yes," I replied; "but I will not discuss business on Christmas Eve."

“No—no,” he said, hurriedly, “certainly not; I did not mean that; but of course it makes me very unhappy.”

“What makes you unhappy?” I asked.

“My wife imagines that he has died in debt, and that he thought I should do something to help him; but I do not see how it is possible.”

“Why should you think he has died in debt?” I asked.

“He wrote to us some months since,” said the squire, “and we could not understand the drift of what he said. Perhaps I had better explain that John married soon after he reached India; whether his wife had any money or not, we never knew; he evidently married for love. She must have been a friendless girl, too, for when he sent the child home, he wrote: ‘You are the only person to whom I can trust her; her mother has no friends living.’ The mother, as I suppose you know, died when the child was born. Poor Viola! How she lived I can not tell. She was seven years old when she reached us—a frail, delicate child. Captain Anderson and his wife brought her here, and here she has been ever since. John Ruthven made no special arrangements. He wrote, saying the doctors had told him if she remained in India she must die, and that, knowing I was married, he had sent the child to me, commending her to the care of myself and my wife.”

“It was a hazardous thing to do,” I said.

The squire frowned.

“I wish, with all my heart, he had never done it,” he sighed; “not but that I love Viola, but there has been so many quarrels over it. At first Mrs. Beresford refused point-blank to allow it. I might send the child back to India, or to boarding-school, or to the work-house—she would have none of her. Before the question was finally settled where she was to go, a remittance came from India, large enough to induce Mrs. Beresford to keep her. John Ruthven wrote, with the remittance, saying that he would send the same yearly; that he would defray all the expenses of the child’s education, and that he would give us some substantial proof of his gratitude. John was always careless; at times two years or more would pass without his sending at all, then would come a hurried letter and a check—never the right amount—and always the same excuse that he had no time to write, he was engrossed in

business, but everything would be made straight when he returned to England.

"I wrote several letters to him, begging of him to be more attentive, telling him how his want of punctuality brought me into collision with Mrs. Beresford, who always seemed to think I had done wrong in having a cousin at all, much less a cousin who had burdened us with a child.

"For two years before John's death we had no remittance—indeed, no letters—only one hurried line to say that he hoped to return to England soon, and then the old familiar phrase—we should find it all right. The next thing we heard was of his death, so that he has left the child on our hands. I do not care, but my wife does not like it."

"You do not think, then, that John Ruthven left any fortune?" I asked.

The squire laughed.

"I do not," he said. "If he had had money, he would have sent plenty for his only child."

"It may just be possible," I said, "that he was saving money to surprise you all with when he came back."

The squire shook his head sadly.

"I am sure not," he replied. "Mrs. Beresford thinks he has died in debt, and that we shall have to provide for Viola."

"Would that be such a great hardship?" I asked.

"Not to me," he replied, eagerly—"not to me; but my wife would not like it; we should have no peace; in fact, we have no peace now. Guy has fallen in love with Viola. He told his mother and myself to-day that he would never marry unless he married her, and she is just as much in love with him. Guy returns to London on Tuesday, and Mrs. Beresford talks of sending Viola away."

I laughed in my sleeve, for I knew that long before Tuesday, proud Mrs. Beresford would be ready to pray for Viola Ruthven to stay with them.

The music, the dancing, all the happy, innocent Christmas merriment came to an end; and as yet I had not been introduced by host or hostess to Viola Ruthven.

CHAPTER IV.

CHRISTMAS DAY was just as beautiful as Christma Eve had been, the sun shining on the frozen snow and on the hoar-frost. Early in the morning the chiming of the Christmas bells came over the snow; early enough the sound of Christmas greetings and merriment sounded in the old Manor House. We were all to breakfast together, and walked to church, a distance of more than two miles; but nothing, the squire said, could be more delightful than a long walk over the frozen snow, for the young people. Mrs. Beresford, of course, would drive. The breakfast-table round which we all assembled groaned with good cheer; it gave me an excellent idea of what a country breakfast at Christmas-time was like. The whole of the family were present, and several visitors—the presence of the visitors was a decided relief to us all. The squire looked happy; he was one of those fortunate men who at Christmas-time resolutely “banish dull care;” he would be happy; he would laugh, jest, and tease, because it was Christmas. Mrs. Beresford was inclined to be amiable until Viola entered, and the very sight of that beautiful face seemed to irritate her. Clarissa and Helena were inclined to be good-tempered, because it was Christmas Day, and bad-tempered because the frost had given to both an additional ruddy tinge; had, as Clarissa phrased it, spoiled their complexions for the day. Handsome, cheery Guy, whom I was beginning to love with all my heart, neither saw nor heard any one else after Viola entered the room. She came in just as we were taking our seats at the breakfast-table. If I had thought her beautiful last night under the holly-trees, when her face was white with misery and stained with tears, what did I think her now?

Her face was fresh with the lovely bloom blown by the morning air; her hair seemed to have caught the glint of the winter's sunshine; her eyes were like “heart's-ease wet with dew.” Looking at her, no one could have thought that only last night she had gone out to see if she had courage enough to die. Her tall, slender figure showed to perfection in a tight-fitting black dress. She

was beautiful, graceful, and courteous as a young queen; but I knew by the faces of the women when she entered the room that they all disliked and were jealous of her.

The beautiful, fresh-faced child! the frost and snow had not taken the lovely bloom from her—they had deepened it into rarest rose color; and when the squire brought her up to me, I was startled at her exceeding loveliness; in my own mind I compared the coloring of her face to the rich red berries and white snow; but then I am no poet. We met as strangers; the squire introduced Viola as the daughter of my old friend John Ruthven, and again the beautiful eyes met mine, as she murmured gently, “My father’s friend!” Then Guy, who had never taken his eyes from her face, and who was evidently jealous of me, came up to us. No need to tell any one there had been love passages between these two beautiful young people—no need; her face told the story, and he looked as though he worshiped her.

“I will find you a chair, Viola,” he said; and just as he was on the point of seating himself next to her, Mrs. Beresford said, in a loud voice:

“Guy, come and sit next to me; I want to talk to you.”

Viola flushed crimson. Guy’s firm lips grew pale, but he did not go. I liked him for that.

“I am going to attend to Viola, mother,” he said; “we will talk afterward.”

“Viola knows mamma likes you near her when you are at home,” said Clarissa.

“Viola can always take good care of herself,” said Helena, and then a gloom fell over the breakfast-table.

“Come,” said the squire, “this will not do. It is Christmas morning. Be gone, dull care! let us be happy. As the waits sung last evening, ‘may nothing you dismay!’”

Guy profited by the advice, but Viola did not seem to recover herself.

The next struggle was that Mrs. Beresford resolved Guy and Viola should not go to church together; the lovely, frosty morning must not be given to idle love-making. At first she said Viola should go in the carriage with her; then Guy declared he should drive, too; finally, Mrs. Beresford called me to her side.

“Mr. Rayner,” she said, “I shall be glad if you would

take charge of Miss Ruthven. I do not wish my son to take her to church, and I shall trust her to you."

"But, my dear madame—" I began, but she interrupted me impatiently.

"You must do it," she said; "I will not have them together."

I thought to myself that if she had known I had a quarter of a million of money as that young lady's fortune, how differently she would have acted.

I shall never forget the beauty of that walk through the woods. The ground was white and hard; the hoar-frost lay over it like a silver veil; the sun shone until the white snow glistened; and the beautiful tracery of the great bare branches stood out in bold relief under the dark-blue sky.

Viola blushed as we passed the holly-trees; she turned her frank, fair face toward me.

"I am ashamed of myself," she said. "Whatever you came here for originally, you certainly saved my life. I was mad last night with shame, vexation, and despair."

"Tell me all about it," I said. "Remember, I am your father's friend, and yours; remember, too, that I have come purposely to bring you good news."

"I wonder," she said, "what that good news is?"

"A quarter of million of money," I thought to myself, and my heart beat as I pictured her surprise when she knew it. "Tell me," I said, "what was the matter last evening? I can see that you are not very happy here, but there must have been something out of the common to have sent you out in that state of despair."

The beautiful face flushed, and the sweet, proud eyes drooped before mine.

"It was out of the common," she said, with a smile and a sigh.

"Tell me what it was," I said.

She laughed, and the sweet, girlish laughter gladdened my heart.

"I can not tell you all at once," she said. "I—I must lead up to it."

"Begin at the beginning, Viola," I said, "and tell me all that you remember about yourself."

The rest of that gay Christmas party were ahead of us. We could hear the squire's genial laughter; he always

seemed to enjoy himself so much better out of his wife's sight. I could see, also, to my great amusement, the jealous glances that Guy threw back at me.

"I can tell you nothing about India," she began; "it is all a confused dream to me of glaring hot sunshine and black faces. I lived with a widow lady, an officer's widow, and she took care of me until I was six years old; then I had a severe illness and was sent to England. I can not remember," she said, "whether we were poor people or rich; but what I do remember is that I was the most lonely child in the wide world. No one seemed to love or care for me. My father—I can not remember his face, although I loved him dearly—would come to see me at times, always in a great hurry, and if I prayed him to remain, he would answer, 'I am too busy, my little girl; I am working so hard; but it is all for you—all for you, Viola.' I never saw him for more than an hour at a time, and that not often. Then comes a dream of a long, tedious illness, during which it seemed to me that I was being slowly burned to death; then comes a dream of cool sea-breezes, of nothing but water during long nights and days; then I was here at Dene Manor House.

"Not at all a sensational story, is it?" she asked, with a piteous drooping of the sweet lips, and I thought to myself that the sensation was all to come.

"I was quite a child when I came here," she continued, "but I saw that I was not welcome, and not wanted. Can you imagine what that means? I have been here eleven years, and have felt myself unwelcome the whole time. I make no complaint. Some people would have been even less kind. I ought never to have been sent here; they did not want me. I have heard Mrs. Beresford say, hundreds of times, that she was unwilling to do so from the first, and at the first. Could any words tell the unhappiness of a child living where she was neither wanted nor welcome?

"The squire has been fond of me and kind to me; he has never said a harsh word or done one unkind deed; he has always, so far as he could, shielded and sheltered me, when he could do so without attracting observation; he has permitted me indulgences, gratified my desires; if he could, he would have bought for me all kinds of pretty things, as he did for his own daughters, but Mrs. Beres-

ford would not permit it, and, for the sake of peace, he was compelled to refrain.

"From the hour I entered the house until now," she continued, "Mrs. Beresford has hated me. She has grudged me the food I have eaten and the clothes I wear. I do not complain; some people would have been worse, but it has been cruelly hard upon me. I can only imagine," she continued, "that my dear father, in that far-off land, had idealized the squire, and thought that he had married a woman who was almost an angel. Perhaps most women would resent the part of having a child thrust into their household, whether they wished it or not, but I think the hearts of most women would have softened to a little, desolate, motherless child. I need not dwell on the details of these years. I say all, I tell you everything in those few words: I have never been wanted, and I have never been welcome."

"But the girls," I said; "surely they have been kind to you?"

She seemed to shrink from the subject. I might have remembered that two plain girls were not always tolerant of a beautiful one.

"Still," she said, half hesitating, "in the midst of my misery I have had a gleam of light."

"Now," I thought to myself, "we are leading up to it;" for I guessed pretty well what was coming.

"Guy has always loved me," she said, raising her head proudly. "Whenever he was at home, he took my part in everything. He was the only comfort and refuge and hope I had. He has been everything in the world to me; but it is very unfortunate for him, as it has made his parents so angry with him that Mrs. Beresford said last night she hoped he would never come home again."

"What happened last night?" I repeated.

"I will tell you, Mr. Rayner. When Guy came home this Christmas, he saw that I was—well, to say the least of it—not happy, and he told me how dearly he loved me, and how much he wants to make me his wife. Now, Mrs. Beresford wants him to marry Kate Hildyard—she has a fortune of ten thousand pounds—but Guy will not. He declares that he will marry no one but me. He says that he shall go away and work hard until he has a home for me, and then, in spite of the whole world, he shall come

for me and marry me. But I," she said, rising her graceful head proudly, "I shall never allow that!"

"What shall you do?" I asked.

"I shall wait until the Christmas holidays are over—I do not want to spoil them—then I shall go away. Why, you would help me," she continued, her eyes brightening—"help me to get a situation. I will work for myself, and I will not ruin Guy's life by letting him marry me. I have no fortune, no friends, and he shall not ruin himself for me."

Yet she who spoke was worth a quarter of a million of money!

CHAPTER V.

"Do you not think I am right?" she asked.

"Yes, quite right," I answered. "But what about last night?" returning again to the charge.

"It was yesterday," she continued, "that Guy told the squire and Mrs. Beresford that he loved me and wanted me for his wife. They were very angry, and there was a great disturbance. Mrs. Beresford was most angry with me. She said I had inveigled him, lured him, tricked him; she said such cruel things to me that they seemed to blister my face with shame; I shall never forget them until I die; but the worst of it was—"

She stopped shyly.

"Tell me the worst of it," I said, with an air of resolution.

She went on:

"I—I was going across the hall," she said; "it was just before dinner, and I had a dim suspicion that Guy would be lingering about the staircase or in the hall waiting for me, and surely there he was"—a rush of color crimsoned her face, and her eyes filled with tears. "I love him so," she said, apologetically, "I can hardly speak of him without tears. He was waiting for me. The hall was full of shadows, and we did not see any one else. 'My darling,' he cried, 'I have been here for an hour waiting for you. We shall have just one quarter of an hour before dinner.' He came to me and clasped my hands. 'If I could only tell you,' he said, 'how grieved I am; but I shall make it all up to you when you are my wife. You

will be the happiest; the most beautiful, the most beloved wife in the wide world.'

"There was a mistletoe bough hanging close to us; he drew me under it and kissed me, not once—I am bound to tell the truth—but many times; kissed me as though he would never part with me in this world again. There was a sound; we both looked up; there stood Mrs. Beresford, her face white with rage, her eyes seeming to flame anger.

"Disgraceful!" she hissed. "To you, Guy, I speak no word; you, Viola, go to your own room, and remain there until I come."

"I went. When she came—ah! no, I can not tell even you, my father's friend, what she said, only that it drove me mad. I said I would go out and drown myself; she answered me that it was the best thing I could do; that I was a useless burden to them, and should be the ruin of their only son.

"I did not wait to think whether it was wrong or right, for I was mad with my own misery, and with the shameful words that she had used to me. I rushed out of the house to go down to the mere. I was so mad, so carried out of my senses by anger, that if the water had been flowing and free, I should have flung myself into its depths; but Heaven, in its mercy, had locked it up in one freezing mass, and then I saw you, and you said you had good news for me; then I felt better."

"It was a very wicked thing of you to do or think of," I said.

"I know it," she answered, humbly, "but I was driven mad; her angry, shameless, cruel words had driven me mad. I shall never do it again. I shall go away and fade quite out of their lives. I shall never let even Guy know where I am—Guy whom I love so much."

"You do love him, then?" I said.

"Yes; I love him with all my heart, and I shall never love any one else as long as I live; but I shall never drag him down to ruin; I love him too much for that. You will help me, because you were my father's friend? I am sure that I can earn money; I can sing and paint."

"I will help you," I interrupted; and then some of the gay party turned back to us. Guy's handsome face was pale with jealousy. He came up to me on the road home.

"Mr. Rayner," he said, with all the candor natural to

youth, "I do not know whether you are my friend or my foe."

I laughed outright at this.

"Your friend, you may be quite sure," I answered, and his face cleared.

"I heard my mother tell you to take care of Viola, so that I should not talk to her. Now, Viola," he continued, "is mine, my own. No one shall take her from me, no one shall part us. I mean to love her until I die, and after death if I can. I tell you honestly that I love Viola, and I want to make her my wife. I will make her my wife in spite of all opposition. She has had a cruel life, and I intend to make it all up to her; I mean to make her as happy in the future as she has been miserable in the past, and that is saying a great deal. "My mother says if I marry her I shall never have the Manor House or one shilling of my father's money. I will do without both. I am young and strong—I can work and wait for her; I would work all my life for her."

My heart went out to the brave, manly young fellow who had so true a heart.

"There was a great unpleasantness last night," he said, "because my mother saw me kiss Viola. Who could help it?" cried Guy. "Christmas Eve, your own beautiful sweetheart close to you, and a mistletoe bough over your head! It was not in human nature to help it, certainly not in mine. I wished there had been fifty mistletoe boughs—I would have kissed her under each one. Do you blame me?"

"No, certainly not. I should have done the same thing," I answered.

"I thought I had better tell you just how the land lay. You are a friend of the family, the squire says, and it would be quite natural if you took the part of the heads of the family against us."

"I shall do no such thing," I replied. And by that time we had reached home.

There was a grand Christmas dinner, to which a large party of guests had been invited, and a most enjoyable party it was. My chief occupation, I must confess, was watching those beautiful young lovers, and certainly there could not have been a prettier sight in the world.

"I shall see that Viola spends to-night with us," said

Guy to me. "Last night, although it was Christmas Eve, my mother would not allow her to leave her room, but there shall be nothing of that kind to-night."

From those words I saw that he was ignorant of the episode of the holly-trees. He little knew how nearly he had lost her. I had not been much with lovers before. I must say these two delighted me; the helpless, hopeless fashion in which they seemed to be attracted to each other, the complete abandonment with which they ignored all the rest of the world, the pretty little artifices by which they managed for a time to get near each other. It was all so new and so beautiful to me. Despite the gloom that hung over the family, the anger against Viola that she had won the heart of their son, their anger against Guy for loving her, it was a happy Christmas party. It is not often that visitors and friends know or see or understand any little domestic drama played before their eyes. Few, if any, of these guests who enjoyed themselves so heartily knew that a silent struggle was going on. I was the only one present who knew anything of it. That Christmas night, while music, and dancing, and merriment were at their best, Mrs. Beresford sent for me.

Up to this time she had not taken much interest in me. As a member of a very well-known firm, I was treated with a certain amount of respect and consideration; but as a solicitor who had come down to talk over John Ruthven's business matters, I was decidedly an enemy; but to-night she was pleased to be most gracious. She made room for me by her side on the velvet couch; she spoke in kindly tones; she smiled most amiably.

"Dear Mr. Rayner," she began, "in your legal capacity you must come across many strange things."

I told her that was the case.

"No phase of human nature is strange to you," she continued.

I replied, "No; I thought not."

"You will have met young men before now who have been their own ruin by a foolish marriage," she said.

I answered, "Yes; but that I had met quite as many who were ruined because they did not marry at all."

"It is strange," she said, "that you should just come to visit us when are at the very climax of a family—I may say—quarrel. You have heard, of course, of the dreadful

misfortune over Guy. Dear Mr. Rayner, I wish you would talk to him, reason with him, show him the utter, abject folly of marrying for love. He has set his heart on marrying Viola. She is, I admit, a very pretty girl; but she has nothing in the world to recommend her beyond a pretty face—”

“I thought she was very accomplished,” I interrupted.

“Oh, yes!” was the impatient answer; “but that does not matter. She has no fortune, not one penny; no friends, no influence, no connections; instead of advancing his interests in life, she will ruin him. I have made up my mind to a certain course of action, and I shall pursue it just as obstinately and relentlessly as he will. If he marries Viola against my wishes, prayers, and commands, the squire shall not leave Dene to him. It shall be sold, and the money divided between his sisters. I do not like the girl, and she shall never be mistress of Dene. I want you to show my son more plainly even than I can do how completely he is ruining himself. If he marries Viola he will have nothing to live upon but what he earns, and he will break with his family forever.”

“Do you not think that a hard decision?” I asked, and Mrs. Beresford looked at me with a frown.

“I do not,” she said. “My son has before him as fine a chance as any young man in the country, if he chooses to avail himself of it. He would be master of Dene; he would get into Parliament; he is wonderfully clever, and if he had once had an *entrée* into public life, he would soon make a name; but to do this he must marry some one with money and influential connections.”

“I see; but if he loves the young lady and she loves him, do you not think it would be wiser to allow them to marry?”

“No, I do not. You know as well as I do that love is all nonsense. Young people can not live on it; young men can not make their way upon it; it is all weak, sentimental nonsense. You know it, Mr. Rayner. Sensible people leave such things quite out of their calculations. You, being an old friend of his father, and a man of the world, would naturally have great influence with him. I see that he is disposed to like you and to trust you. Will you undertake to talk to him for me, Mr. Rayner?”

“Would not the squire be the best person?” I suggested; and again a frown passed over the handsome face.

“The squire is weak-minded over the matter; he is fond of the girl, and can not make up his mind to be severe or firm enough. So far as I see, you are the best person, and the only person, to help us, if you will.”

I repeated that I would do anything for the good of the family. Then I asked:

“Have you any other objection to Viola besides her want of fortune?”

“I am not likely to like her,” she said, with a flash in her eyes. “She has been a great burden upon us; we have not agreed very well. She is too independent, too high-spirited. I do not like her, but I could tolerate her if she had a large fortune; but she has not.”

Here she looked at me wonderingly.

“You came to talk over some business affairs of John Ruthven with the squire, did you not?”

“Yes,” I answered; “but the squire said we were to have two days’ respite from business. I shall tell mine to-morrow.”

“I hope you will not draw my husband into anything imprudent,” said Mrs. Beresford. “If John Ruthven has left debts or unsettled affairs, it is no business of ours.”

“Decidedly not,” I answered; and there our conversation ended.

CHAPTER VI.

THE day after Christmas Day—and we were to discuss business. The very name was irksome, for the sun was shining, the holly berries glowing, the robin-redbreast hopping about, and the young people in the house were in a perfect ferment of agitation over the skating on the mere.

The ice was so many inches thick, Clarissa declared, that it was firm enough to hold a regiment of soldiers.

Nothing was thought of or spoken of but skating; fresh, fair faces glowing with excitement met one at every turn; the squire was just as bad as the rest.

“Never mind business for a few hours,” he said; “business can be done at all times and in all seasons, but

such a frost as this, such ice as this, may not be seen again for years. Wait, at least, till after luncheon."

There was nothing for it but to do as he wished.

As I was crossing the hall I saw Viola; she looked pale and anxious.

"Are you not going out with us to-day?" I asked.

"No," she replied; "I have no heart; I could not even keep up appearances. I want to be alone—where I can weep out all my sorrow. Guy leaves to-morrow, and I intend to go directly after him; I shall never see him again, and my heart is heavy. I shall not tell him," she continued; "it would make him so unhappy; but when I have left Dene, I shall write to him and tell him that he must forget me. I could not go out this morning; the darkness that hangs over me is the darkness of death."

"Now, Rayner," cried the squire, "we are all waiting for you."

Had it not been for that interruption, I must have told her the truth then and there, for the sight of that sorrowful young face was most distressing to me. I did not enjoy the skating; my heart was with Viola. I knew that when all the facts of the case were known she would be welcomed most joyfully by the whole family, but I was sorry for her. I could not bear to think that it was money which would make all the difference. But, then, Guy loved her truly, and one true love in a life-time is more than falls to the lot of most people. Guy loved her; he wanted no money, no influential connections, he wanted nothing but herself, her own bright, beautiful, winsome self; he wanted to marry her and work for her, and cared for nothing else. But with the others, even with the squire himself, it was a different matter—they cared little for Viola, and very much about money.

Guy was not among the skaters, and it struck me very forcibly that, although he had started out with us, he must have returned, and the chances were that, knowing we were all out of the way, he would contrive a *tête-à-tête* with Viola. It would be a miserable one, but the misery would end soon and happiness take its place. The squire and I walked home together; the young people preferred to spend another hour on the ice.

"Business this afternoon," said the squire. "We will

go to the library after luncheon. I hope the details are not too dreadful."

"You will survive them," I answered, with a careless laugh.

"I know John was sanguine, and I should think not overprudent; but I can not imagine what I can have to do with his affairs, unless it be to provide for his daughter."

"We shall see," I said. If they knew!

As we passed the drawing-room door, we heard the sound of loud voices and weeping.

"What is the matter?" said the squire.

He opened the door quickly and went in. I followed him. Some instinct told me there was a crisis.

"Come in," said Mrs. Beresford, "come in, and you, Mr. Rayner. I am glad you are both here."

"What is the matter?" asked the squire.

It was a dramatic scene. Mrs. Beresford—her proud, handsome face flushed with anger—stood like a judge; Guy, with his arms thrown round Viola, as though he would protect and shield her from everything that could hurt her. I shall never forget the loving pride and tenderness of his face as Viola's beautiful head drooped on his breast; it was well worth while, I thought, to be just a little unhappy to elicit the sure proof of such true love.

"I am glad you have both come," said Mrs. Beresford.

"I am determined to put a stop to this state of things. It is disgraceful. Guy," continued the angry lady, "take your arms away from that girl; I insist upon it. It is unseemly."

"My dear mother," said Guy, calmly, "I almost wish I had another arm to throw round Viola. How hard and cruel you are to her, just because she has no money. Why, she is a fortune in herself that a king might envy. Do not cry, Viola," he added, bending his face over the fair head that drooped on his breast. "Do not cry, my darling. If I lose Dene and everything else in the world, I do not care if only I win you."

"But I care," said John Ruthven's daughter, proudly.

"I will not let you ruin yourself for my sake."

"There can be no ruin with you, Viola," said Guy, and to emphasize his words he kissed her.

Mrs. Beresford threw up her hands and eyes in horror.

"If you repeat that, Guy, I shall leave the room," she

said; and Guy looked very much inclined to repeat it, but he refrained.

“Will any one be good enough to tell me what is the matter?” asked the squire.

“I will tell you,” replied his angry lady. “You know that I have forbidden any kind of love nonsense between my son and Viola Ruthven. I have said distinctly that I will not have it. I have forbidden them to speak to each other, and in my own house I will be obeyed—”

“In reason, mother,” interrupted Guy.

“And out of reason,” said the angry lady. “I have forbidden it. I consider that Viola Ruthven is basely ungrateful. We have fed her, and clothed her; and educated her, and she shows her gratitude by luring our only son to his ruin.”

“But what is the matter now?” cried the squire. “What is there afresh? Why is Viola in tears? I do not understand.”

“You will if you listen,” said Mrs. Beresford. “I forbid anything of the kind, yet what happens? This morning I sent Viola to her room with some work that I wanted done, and Guy went out skating. I thought them both safe, and an hour afterward I saw them, positively saw them, in the holly walk. Such deceit and duplicity are unendurable. I will not have it,” continued the irate lady. “Guy shall never marry Viola, never while I live. I insist that Viola shall be locked in her room until Guy has left the house. Now you see what is the matter, Dudley: deceit, clandestine meetings under our very roof.”

“There was nothing clandestine about it, mother,” cried Guy. “Viola is going to be my wife. Surely I have the right to see her and speak to her when I choose.”

“You have no such right,” replied the angry woman. “Now, Viola Ruthven, come away from my son. In my young days girls were more modest and retiring. Leave my son and go up to your own room, and there remain until he has left the house.”

“My dear mother—” began Guy; but I interrupted him.

“May I speak a few words?” I said, drawing nearer to the little group. “Perhaps what I have to say may change the views of some people.”

They all looked at me curiously. What a lesson in human nature it was for me!

"The squire wished me not to speak on business until the Christmas holiday was over," I said. "I have obeyed him, but I think the time has come now when I must speak. You all know that I came here purposely to talk over John Ruthven's business affairs with the squire, but no one among you has thought much what those business affairs were."

I saw the wonder in their faces, but Mrs. Beresford shot at me but one word:

"Debts!" she said.

"No," I answered; "there is no question of debt. You have all taken it for granted that John Ruthven died poor."

I saw Viola raise her head from her lover's breast and look at me with wet, wistful eyes.

"It is a mistake," I said, solemnly, "a great mistake. John Ruthven always said that he should make money, and he has done so. He has left behind him an enormous fortune."

I saw Viola clinging to her lover; the squire turned pale and whistled, a long shrill whistle for which at any other time his wife would have annihilated him; it passed now unheeded. Mrs. Beresford sunk into the nearest chair. Guy, under cover of all his emotion, kissed Viola again.

"Our firm," I continued, "have received all the papers—the will and all the instructions. To you, Squire Beresford, in memory of your old friendship and in loving gratitude to you for your care and kindness to his only child, he has left—ten thousand pounds."

If a thunder-bolt had fallen among them they could not have been more astounded.

"Ten thousand pounds!" gasped the squire. "My poor old friend!"

"How noble!" said Mrs. Beresford. "Why did you not tell us before?"

"I have not finished, madame. The time for telling the news was left entirely to my own judgment. John Ruthven no doubt hoped to come home and enjoy many happy years with his daughter. Heaven willed it otherwise; but he has made her one of the richest heiresses in

England—he has left her a fortune of a quarter of a million of money.”

It was worth much to see the consternation on every face; even Viola herself grew deathly pale, and for a few minutes there was perfect silence.

Then—oh, noble human nature!—Mrs. Beresford turned to Viola. She spoke in the blindest of voices, the sweetest of smiles.

“A quarter of a million of money?” she said. “What a fortune! Of course, my dear, this makes a difference.”

Of course it did. I shall never forget the scene that followed; it brought tears to my eyes. The delight and happiness of the two lovers knew no bounds. For many days afterward Mrs. Beresford never ceased repeating to herself, “A quarter of a million of money!” There was no reason for concealing the truth; it soon spread over the whole household, and what a scene of congratulation and amazement there was! I shall never forget it. Of course it ended happily. Viola turned out to be one of the most generous of women; she would give Clarissa and Helena a handsome dowry, but there was one thing she would not do—she would not be mistress of Dene. She forgave Mrs. Beresford, but she never really liked her. The squire she had always loved.

Mrs. Beresford veered round almost too suddenly; she declared Viola to be the most beautiful, the most charming, the most accomplished of girls. It is wonderful what a difference a quarter of a million of money makes.

Of course they were married. Guy gave up the bar and went into Parliament. They purchased a beautiful estate in Devonshire called Luton House. They are happy, prosperous, and beloved, but I never see the moon shining on the snow or hear the Christmas bells chime but I think of the beautiful, despairing face I saw so many years ago
“Under the Holly Berries.”

THE END.

CORALIE.

CHAPTER I.

“EIGHTY pounds a year!” My reader can imagine that this was no great fortune. I had little or nothing to spend in kid gloves or cigars; indeed, to speak plain, prosaic English, I went without a good dinner far oftener than I had one. Yet, withal, I was passing rich on eighty pounds a year.

My father, Captain Trevelyan, a brave and deserving officer, died when I was a child. My mother, a meek, fragile invalid, never recovered his loss, but died some years after him, leaving me alone in the world with my sister Clare.

When I was young I had great dreams of fame and glory. I was to be a brave soldier like my dear dead father, or a great writer, or a statesman. I dreamed of everything except falling into the common grooves of life—which was my fate in after years. My mother, believing in my dreams, contrived to send me to college—we both considered a college education the only preliminary to a golden future. How she managed it out of her slender means, I can not tell, but she kept me at college for three years. I was just trying to decide what profession to adopt, when a letter came summoning me suddenly home.

My mother was ill, not expected to live.

When I did reach home I found another source of trouble. My sister Clare, whom I had left a beautiful, blooming girl of eighteen, had been ill for the last year. The doctors declared it to be a spinal complaint, from which she was not likely to recover, although she might live for years.

She was unable to move, but lay always on a couch or sofa. The first glimpse of her altered face, so sweet, so

sad and colorless, made my heart ache. All the youth and bloom had died out of it.

My mother did not live many days; at her death her income ceased, and I found myself at twenty obliged to begin the world as best I could, the sole protector of my invalid sister. The first step was to sell our little home, a pretty cottage at Hampstead, then to take lodgings nearer the city; after that I set vigorously to work to look for a situation.

Ah, me, that weary task! I wonder if any of my readers ever went quite alone, friendless, almost helpless into the great modern Babylon, to look for a situation; if so, they will know how to pity me. I spent many pounds in advertisements; I haunted the agency offices; I answered every advertisement I read—it seemed all in vain.

My father's regiment was then in India, but I wrote to several of the officers who had known and valued him. Then, as a last resource, I looked up the few friends my mother had.

If there is one thing more dreary than looking for a situation it is what is commonly called "hunting up one's friends." I found many, but some were old and indifferent, others too much engrossed in their own affairs to have any time to devote to mine. Some shook hands, wished me well, promised to do all they could to help me, and before I had passed from their sight forgot my existence.

I gave up my friends. Their help in the hour of need is a beautiful theory, but very seldom put into practice.

Just as I was growing dull and dispirited, a friend upon whom I had not called, and whose aid I had not solicited, wrote to me, and offered me a situation as clerk in his office, with a salary of eighty pounds per annum, to be afterward increased. God send to every wearied heart the comfort this news brought to mine. I ran to Clare with the letter in my hands.

"Eighty pounds a year, darling!" I cried; "there is a fortune!"

We had neither of us ever had much to do with money; we were quite ignorant of its value, how far it would go, what it would purchase, etc. It seemed an inexhaustible sum. We had cheap, comfortable apartments in Hollaway—a room for my sister, and two smaller rooms for myself. When I think of her patience, her resignation, her unvary-

ing sweetness, her constant cheerfulness, my heart does homage to the virtue and goodness of women.

One fine morning in September I went for the first time to work. The office of Lawson Brothers was in Lincoln's Inn. The elder brother seldom if ever appeared; the younger was always there. He gave me a very kindly welcome, said he hoped I should not find my work tiresome, showed me what I had to do, and, altogether, set me at my ease.

I sighed many times that morning to find of how little use was my college education to me now, and I sighed to think how all my dreams, all my hopes and aspirations, had ended behind a clerk's desk, with eighty pounds per annum in lieu of the fortune of which I had dreamed.

After a few days I became used to the novelty, and did my best to discharge my duties well.

Hundreds of young men in London lead lives similar to mine, with very little variety; the only way in which I differed from them was that I had my sister Clare to provide for. Alas! how soon I found out what a small sum eighty pounds a year was! When we had paid the rent of our three rooms, set aside a small sum for clothes and a small sum for food, there was nothing left. Clare, whose appetite was dainty and delicate, suffered greatly. I could not manage to provide even a bunch of grapes for her; the trifling coppers I spent in flowers, that cheered her as nothing else ever did, were sorely missed.

How I longed sometimes to take home a ripe peach, a bottle of wine, an amusing book! But every penny was rigorously needed; there was not one to spare. How I pitied her for the long hours she spent alone in those solitary lodgings! A bright inspiration came to me one day: I thought how glad I should be if I could get some work to do at night, if it were but possible to earn a few shillings. I advertised again, and after some time succeeded in getting copying to do, for which I was not overwell paid.

I earned a pound—positively a whole golden sovereign—and when it lay in my hand my joy was too great for words. What should I do with one sovereign, and such a multiplicity of wants? Do not laugh at me, reader, when I tell you what I did do, after long and anxious debate with myself. I paid a quarter's subscription at Mudie's, so that my poor sister should have something to while

away the dreary hours of the long day. With the few shillings left I bought her a bottle of wine and some oranges.

That is years ago, but tears rise to my eyes now when I remember her pretty joy, how gratefully she thanked me, how delicious she found the wine, how she made me taste it, how she opened the books one after another, and could hardly believe that every day she would have the same happiness—three books, three beautiful new books! Ah, well! As one grows older, such simple pleasures do not give the same great joy.

It was some time before I earned another. It was just as welcome, and there came to me a great wonder as to whether I should spend the whole of my life in this hard work with so small a recompense.

“Surely,” I said to myself, “I shall rise in time; if I am diligent and attentive at the office, I must make my way.”

But, alas! the steps were very small, and the clerks’ salaries were only increased by five pounds a year at a time. It would be so long before I earned two hundred a year, and at the same rate I should be an old man before I reached three hundred.

One morning—it was the 1st of May—a bright, warm, sunny day, the London streets were more gay than usual, and as I walked along I wondered if ever again I should breathe the perfume of the lime and the lilac in the spring-time. I saw a girl selling violets and daffodils, with crocuses and spring flowers. I am not ashamed to say that tears came into my eyes—flowers and sunshine and all things sweet seemed so far from me now.

I reached the office, and there, to my intense surprise, found a letter waiting me.

“Here is a letter for you, Mr. Trevelyan,” said the head clerk, carelessly.

He gave me a large, blue official envelope. If he had but known what it contained!

Some minutes passed before I had time to open it; then I read as follows:

“TO SIR EDGAR TREVELYAN:

“SIR,—We beg to inform you that by the death of Sir Barnard Trevelyan, and his son, Mr. Miles Trevelyan, who

both died of the epidemic in Florence, you, as next of kin, will succeed. We are not aware that the late Sir Barnard had any other relatives. Crown Anstey, the residence of the late baronet, is ready at any time for your reception. If you can favor us with a call to-day, we will explain to you the different ways in which the late baronet's large fortune is invested. We have managed the Crown Anstey property for some years, and hope to have the honor of continuing our business relations with you. We are, sir, your obedient servants,

“MORELAND & PAINE.”

The letter fell from my hands, and I looked at it in blank astonishment too great for words.

Sir Barnard Trevelyan! Crown Anstey! Why, the last time I ever heard those names my mother sat talking to me about this proud, stately cousin of my father—a cousin who had never noticed either him or us by word or by look. I was curious, and asked many questions about him. She told me he had married some great lady, the daughter of a duke, and that he had two sons—Miles, the eldest, and Cecil. I remembered having heard of Cecil's death, but never dreamed that it could affect me.

Moreland & Paine! I knew the firm very well; they had large offices in Lincoln's Inn, and bore a high reputation. Suddenly my heart stood still. Why, of course, it was a jest—a sorry jest of one of my fellow-clerks. There they were, looking at me with eager, wondering eyes—of course it was a jest. My heart almost ceased to beat, and I caught my breath with something like a sob.

They should not laugh at me; they should not read what was passing in my mind.

I put the letter calmly and deliberately in my pocket, and opened my ledger. I fancied they looked disappointed. Ah! it was but a jest; I would not think of it.

I worked hard until the dinner hour, and then asked permission to absent myself for a time. Dinner was not in my thoughts, but I went quickly as I could walk to the office of Moreland & Paine.

CHAPTER II.

MR. PAINE was not in. Mr. Moreland was in his office. I went up the stairs, trembling, fearful of being abused for stupidity in taking the least notice of such a letter.

Mr. Moreland looked up when the clerk announced my name--looked up, bowed, and positively rose from his seat. I took the letter from my pocket.

"I received this this morning, but believing it to be a jest played upon me, I have not mentioned it. I have called to ask you if you know anything of it."

He took the letter from me with a strange smile.

"I wrote it myself last evening," he said; and I looked at him bewildered.

My God! it was all true. To this moment I do not know how I bore the shock. I remember falling into a chair, Mr. Moreland standing over me with a glass of something in his hand, which he forced me to drink.

"Your fortune has a strange effect upon you," he said, kindly.

"I can not believe it!" I cried, clasping his hand. "I can not realize it! I have been working so hard--so hard for one single sovereign--and now, you say, I am rich!"

"Now, most certainly," he replied, "you are Sir Edgar Trevelyan, master of Crown Anstey and a rent-roll of ten thousand a year."

I am not ashamed to confess that when I heard that I bowed my head on my hands and cried like a child.

"You have borne bad fortune better than this," said Mr. Moreland; and then I remember telling him in incoherent words how poor we had been, and how Clare was fading away for want of the nourishment and good support I was utterly unable to find for her.

After a time I became calmer, and listened while he told me of the death of stately Sir Barnard and his eldest son. They had gone away together on a trip to Italy. Miles Trevelyan was very fond of pictures, and his father had given him permission to buy what he pleased for the great picture-gallery at Crown Anstey.

They went together to Florence, where a fearful epidemic was raging. They, all unconscious of it, remained

there for one night, caught it, and in two days both lay dead.

I asked how old was Miles, this eldest and favorite son. He told me twenty-seven. I asked, again, had he never been married. He answered, no; that, of course, if he had been married, and had children, I should not be the heir to Crown Anstey.

“There was some little unpleasantness between father and son over a love affair,” said Mr. Moreland. “I do not know the particulars. Mr. Miles Trevelyan was very proud and reserved. He mentioned it to us, but we heard no more of it.”

“What am I to do next?” I asked him, nervously.

“You ought to go down at once to Crown Anstey. The bodies of the two gentlemen will be brought home for interment. They died on the 18th; this is the 22d. We spent three days in trying to find out your address. They will be at Crown Anstey, I should say, to-morrow. You should be there to receive them, and to officiate as head mourner. Mr. Paine and myself will both be there, as a matter of course.”

“Then I must ask Mr. Lawson’s permission,” I said, doubtfully.

Mr. Moreland laughed.

“He will soon give you that. You will find the master of Crown Anstey a powerful personage.”

“There is another thing,” I said, with a crimson flush burning my face; “I have but five shillings and sixpence in all the world.”

He laughed aloud at this.

“I can advance you whatever you like, then—five hundred pounds or more.”

The very mention of such a sum positively frightened me. Mr. Moreland looked very much amused.

“It will be some time,” he said, “before you grow accustomed to ten thousand a year.”

At that moment we were interrupted by the arrival of another client. I rose to take my leave, with a check for three hundred pounds in my hand.

“You will go down to Crown Anstey to-night?” said Mr. Moreland, as he shook hands with me. “We shall be there to-morrow morning. You will make what arrangements seem best to you over the funeral.”

So I went away, the most bewildered man in London. As I re-entered the office, I felt ashamed of my suspicions over my fellow-clerks. They were all busy, while I—Oh, God! could it be true?

Mr. Lawson evidently thought I had been drinking when I went, white and stammering, confused and hesitating, into his room. He looked very sternly at me.

“What do you want, Mr. Trevelyan? I am very busy.”

I took out the letter again, and laid it before him.

“Will you read that, sir?” I asked. “It will make you understand more quickly than I can. I am so confused.”

He read it, then held out his hand to me.

“I congratulate you,” he said. “Your poor father, the last time I saw him, spoke to me of his rich cousin. He never expected this. Sir Barnard had two fine, strong, healthy sons of his own then.”

“My father could not have expected it less than myself. I have hardly ever heard the name of Crown Anstey, and did not know that it was entailed property. I shall have to ask you to let me go this afternoon, sir.”

He was perfectly willing. I was only at the office an hour, yet the news seemed to have spread. I promised the clerks a dinner when I returned, then once more I stood in the street, alone.

My brain was dizzy, my thoughts in a whirl. I remember taking a cab and driving to a shop into which I had often looked with longing eyes. I bought wine, grapes, peaches, flowers, dainty jellies—everything that I thought most likely to please my sister—and then drove home. I had resolved that I would not tell my good fortune to Clare all at once, lest there should be some fatal mistake unforeseen by any one. She looked up astonished when I entered the room, my arms full of fruit and flowers.

“Oh, Edgar!” she cried, “you have ruined yourself. Why, you must have spent your whole week’s money.”

I forget now what fiction I told her—something of a friend of my father, who had left me a little money, and that I was going away that same evening on business.

“Shall you be long?” she asked, with so sad a face I did not like to leave her.

“Two or three days at the outside,” I told her. Then I took twenty golden sovereigns from my purse and laid

them before her, begging her not to want for anything while I was away.

She looked almost alarmed at such a quantity of money.

“Twenty pounds, Edgar!” she cried; “how rich we are!” And I thought to myself, “If she only knew!”

Then I went into my own room, and my first action was to thank God for this wonderful benefit. I thanked Him with streaming eyes and a grateful heart, making a promise—which I have never broken—that I would act as steward of these great riches, and not forget the needy and the poor.

At five o'clock I started for Thornycroft, the nearest town to Crown Anstey. The journey was not a very long one, but I took no heed of time. Was it all a dream, or was I going to take possession of a new and magnificent home?

I reached the station—it was a large one. Thornycroft seemed to be a thriving town. No one was there to meet me. I went to the nearest hotel and ordered a carriage for Crown Anstey.

I can recall even now my ecstasy of bewilderment at the splendid woods, the beautiful park, the pleasure-gardens. How long was it since I had felt tears rush warm to my eyes at the scent of the violets? Here were lime-trees and lindens, grand old oaks, splendid poplars, beech-trees, cedars, magnolias with luscious blossom, hawthorn, white and pink larches budding, and all were mine—mine. Then from between the luxuriant foliage I saw the tall gray towers of a stately mansion, and my whole heart went out to it as my future home.

The birds were singing, the sun shining; all nature was so beautiful and bright that my very soul was enraptured.

Then I caught a glimpse of gold from the laburnums, of purple from the lilacs, of white from the sweet acacia-trees.

The carriage drove up a long grove of chestnut-trees, and then for the first time I saw Crown Anstey. The western sunbeams fell upon it. I thought of that line of Mrs. Hemans:

“Bathed in light like floating gold.”

They showed so clearly the dainty, delicate tracing, the large arched windows. The house itself was built in the old Elizabethan style. I found afterward that it was called

Crown Anstey because it had belonged in former years to one of the queens of England. The Queen's Chamber was the largest and best room in it. Report said that a royal head had often lain there, that the queen to whom the house had belonged had spent many of her sorrowful and happy hours there. The Queen's Terrace ran all along the western wing, and was shaded by whispering lime-trees. Afterward I found many relics of this ancient time of royal possessions—antique, out-of-the-way things, with the crown and royal arms of England upon them. I was not a little proud of these historical treasures. A broad flight of steps led from the lawn to a broad porch. As I passed under it, I figured to myself the gorgeous splendor of other days, when "knights and dames of high degree" had entered there.

An old butler, evidently an old family retainer, was the first person I saw. He bowed low when I told him that I was Sir Edgar Trevelyan, "the heir come to take possession."

I went through the magnificent house like a man in a dream. Could it be possible that all this magnificence, all this grandeur was mine? Mine, these grand old rooms, with furniture and hangings that once served a queen; mine, these superb pictures and statues, these gems of art, this profusion of gold and silver plate? I laughed and cried in the same breath. I make no pretensions to being a strong-minded hero, and I was overcome.

Then, when I had been some short time alone, the butler, whose name was Hewson, came back and told me the Red Room was ready for my use. He had selected it as being the most comfortable. Afterward I could, of course, take what rooms I liked.

I found myself in a large, spacious chamber, called the Red Room, from the prevailing tint of everything in it being crimson. The three large windows were hung with crimson velvet; the carpet was crimson. I opened one of the windows and looked over the glorious landscape, so full of sunshine, flowers, and beauty, that my heart thrilled within me, and my soul did homage to the Great Creator.

CHAPTER III.

HALF an hour afterward I was summoned to the dining-room, where dinner was laid for me. God knows I had never coveted wealth or thought much of luxury—I had been content with my lot.

What did I think when I saw that stately dining-room, with its brilliant lights, the gold and silver, the *recherché* dishes, the odorous wines and rare fruits? My first feeling was one of wonder that fortune should have so overpowered me; my second was a fervent wish that such pleasant times could fall to every one.

I had finished dinner and enjoyed, for the first time in my life, a really prime cigar, when Hewson came into the library, evidently wishing to see me.

“I thought I had better tell you, Sir Edgar, that Mademoiselle d’Aubergne is in the drawing-room.”

I looked at him in astonishment.

“Who is Mademoiselle d’Aubergne?” I asked.

“Do you not know, Sir Edgar?” he said, in great surprise.

“I have never even heard the name,” I replied.

“Mademoiselle is the daughter of the late Sir Barnard’s cousin; she has been living here for the last five years. Sir Barnard, I believe, adopted her. I thought perhaps Messrs. Moreland & Paine might have mentioned her.”

They had perhaps forgotten to do so, and I felt quite at a loss what to do. However, if there was a lady in the house, I was bound to be courteous; so I went to the drawing-room.

I attempt no description of that magnificent room, its treasures of art, its statues, pictures, flowers, its wonders of bric-a-brac. For the first minute my eyes were dazzled, then I saw—

Well, I had read in the old poets’ descriptions of the sirens’ wondrous language, wondrous words telling of beauty almost divine in its radiance—of golden hair that had caught the sunshine and held it captive—of eyes like lode-stars, in whose depths men lost themselves—of lovely scarlet lips that could smile and threaten. I saw such loveliness before me now.

From the luxurious depths of a crimson velvet fauteuil rose a lovely woman, who advanced to meet me with outstretched hands. Her mourning-dress fell in graceful folds around her tall, queenly figure, and from the same dark dress her fair face and golden head shone out bright and luminous as a jewel from a dark background.

"Sir Edgar Trevelyan," she said, "allow me to welcome you home."

Her voice was sweet and rich; she had a pretty, piquant accent, and the play of her lips as she spoke was simply perfection.

"It is very lonely for you," she said. "There is great gloom over the house, it is all sad and dark; but the brightness will come back in time."

I touched the white hand she held out to me; it was warm and soft; the touch of those slender fingers had a magical effect.

"I must apologize for not having seen you before," I said, "but until five minutes ago I did not know you were in the house."

"No," she replied, with a faint sigh, "I can believe that."

"You must know," I continued, "that I am a complete stranger to the family. I never saw any of them in my life. I never heard the name more than five or six times."

"Then, as a matter of course," she said, "you never heard of me."

"I am at a loss to know whether I should address you as kinswoman or not," was my confused reply.

"It would take a bench of lawyers to decide," she said. "My mother was a favorite cousin of Sir Barnard. I think, but I am not sure, that once upon a time he was fond of herself. My mother married a French gentleman, Monsieur d'Aubergne, and at her death Sir Barnard kindly offered me a home here, since I had no other."

"Is your father living?" I asked.

"Alas! no; he died when I was a child. There had been some quarrel between my mother and Sir Barnard; perhaps he never forgave her for marrying a Frenchman. During her life-time he never wrote to her, or took the least notice of me."

"And then offered you his home?"

“Then he adopted me,” she said, looking earnestly at me, “treated me in every way as his own child.—I have been with him ever since. I have no home except here at Crown Anstey; and I had not a sou in the world except what he gave me. Ah! I miss him so sorely.”

A cloud came over her beautiful face, and her lips quivered. I sat down in sore perplexity with my inheritance. I had not certainly expected this. What was I to say to her—this beautiful and radiant woman, who seemed thrown upon my hands like a child? There was silence between us for some minutes, then she said, suddenly:

“How sad this is about poor Sir Barnard and his son, is it not? I thought at first that I should never recover from the shock. Miles was a very handsome man; so clever and full of spirits. I am told,” she continued, “that the bodies are to be brought home to-night. Is it true, Sir Edgar?”

“I believe so. I am here to receive them, and to preside at the funeral.”

Her face grew a shade paler.

“I am so frightened and nervous at everything connected with death,” she said.

“Your best plan will be to remain in your own room until it is all over,” I suggested; and she seemed very grateful for the thought.

“Will you take some tea?” she asked, suddenly. “I always made tea for Sir Barnard and Miles.”

Then she drew back shrinkingly, her face crimson.

“I beg your pardon,” she said. “I forgot; I have no right to take the same place now.”

What could I do but hasten to implore her not to yield to such an idea, to consider Crown Anstey her home, as it had been—at least, for a time?

“You make me so happy!” she said; “but how can I—how can I stay here? I find it awkward to explain myself—how can I remain here with you?”

I hastened eagerly to explain that I had a sister, an invalid sister, and that I should be delighted if she would take an interest in her; and it pleased me to think how happy Clare would be.

“Then you wish me to remain here as a companion to your sister?” she said, slowly; and there was evidently some little disappointment in her face.

"Unless we can think of something more pleasant for you," I replied. "We can make that a temporary arrangement. In any case, permit me to say that I shall take the care of your future on my hands, as Sir Barnard would have done."

"You are very kind," she said, thoughtfully; "I had no right to expect that. I did not anticipate anything of the sort."

We talked then in low tones about the late baronet and his son. Of Miles she said very little. Of Sir Barnard she told me many anecdotes, illustrating his pride, his grave, stately character, his intense love of caste, his conservatism. I felt almost as though I had known him before she had finished.

"And Miles," I said, "the poor young heir; how did you like him?"

Was it my fancy, the light flickering on her face, or did a quick shudder pass over it?

"Every one liked him," she said, slowly. "He was proud and reserved; yet he was a general favorite."

She was strangely quiet after that, and I suddenly remembered the drawing-room was hers. I rose, bidding her good-night.

"You shall be sure to hear the stir of the arrival, mademoiselle," I said; "do not let it disturb you. I should advise you to keep your room to-morrow until the funeral is over."

Yet, although I so advised her, it struck me that she did not feel any great amount of sorrow. I can not tell why I had that impression, but it was very strong upon me.

Nine o'clock, and the arrival had not yet taken place. The fragrant gloaming was giving way to night; there was promise of a bright moon, and the golden stars were peeping one by one. The night-wind was laden with odors, a thousand flowers seemed to have given their sweet breath to fan it. It would have been profanation to have lighted a cigar, so I went out on the Queen's Terrace, and walked under the whispering lime-trees, thinking of all that had passed in those few days.

Slowly but surely the conviction gained upon me that I did not like Coralie d'Aubergne. I ought, according to all authentic romances, to have fallen in love with her on the spot, but I was far from doing so. "Why?" I asked

myself. She was very brilliant, very lovely; I had seen no one like her, yet the vague suspicion grew and grew. It was not the face of a woman who could be trusted; there was something insincere beneath its beauty. I should have liked her better if she had shown more sorrow for the awful event that had happened; as it was, I could not help thinking that her chief emotion had been a kind of half fear as to what would become of herself.

Then I reproached myself for thinking so unkindly of her, and resolved that I would not judge her; after that I forgot mademoiselle. I heard the sound of carriage-wheels in the distance, and looking down the long vista of trees, I saw a hearse slowly driven up, and then I knew that the dead Trevelyans had been brought home.

The desolation and sadness of that scene I shall never forget—the hearse, the dark waving plumes, the sight of the two heavy leaden coffins, the servants all in mourning.

A room next the great entrance hall had been prepared; it was all hung with black, and lighted with wax tapers. In the midst stood the two coffins covered with a black velvet pall.

On the coffin of Miles Trevelyan, the son and heir, I saw a wreath of flowers. I asked several times who had brought it, but no one seemed to know.

I do not think any one at Crown Anstey went to rest that night, unless it were mademoiselle. There was something in the event to move the hardest heart.

Father and son had left Crown Anstey so short a time since, full of health, vigor, strength, and plans for the future. They lay there now, side by side, silent and dead; no more plans or hopes, wishes or fears. The saddest day I ever remember was the one on which I helped to lay my two unknown kinsmen in the family vault of the Trevelyans.

CHAPTER IV.

It was all over. The morning, with its sad office, had passed; the servants had gone back to their work; the blinds were drawn up, and light once more found its way into the darkened house. The will was read in the library; the whole of the property, entailed and unentailed, was left to his only son Miles, and after him to his heirs.

There were several legacies to his servants, but no mention was made of mademoiselle. I thought it strange at the time, afterward I understood it.

Of course, as the poor young Miles was dead without heirs, I, as next of kin, took his place. I faithfully carried out every wish expressed in the will. That same evening I sent orders to London for a splendid memorial window to be placed in the church, and while I sat wondering whether I had remembered everything that required attention, there came a rap at the library door. Mademoiselle would be glad if I could see her for five minutes.

I went at once to the drawing-room, knowing she would be there. She was dressed in the deepest mourning, and her face was very pale.

"I knew you would spare me a short time," she said. "I want to ask you a question that I could not ask any one else. Of course you were present when the will was read to-day?"

She raised her eyes to my face. I know not what magnetism, what spell lay in them; but no other eyes were like them. They compelled attention; a man could no more release himself from their glance than he could fly. I was not all in love with her, yet those eyes held me spell-bound.

"I want you to tell me," she said, "if there was any other will. Did—did Miles leave one?"

As she put the question to me, I saw that her lips were parched and burning, her white fingers so tightly clinched that they left great red marks.

"No," I replied; "there was only one will, and that was Sir Barnard's."

A great calm fell over her. After some minutes she looked at me again.

"Was there any mention in that will of me?"

I told her none. Once more she raised those resistless eyes to mine.

"Then I am indeed alone in the world—alone and forsaken."

"Nay, nay!" I cried, eagerly; "do not say so. Clare will take care of you."

"And you?" she asked, in a voice that must have melted an anchorite.

"I will help her—or, rather, I will take care of you both."

“What is your sister like?” she asked, eagerly. “Is she very clever—very beautiful? Shall I be frightened at her?”

“She is the sweetest and most gentle of girls; doubly gentle from her great affliction.”

“What affliction?” she asked, eagerly. “You did not tell me there was anything the matter with her.”

“She has a spinal complaint,” I replied, “and is unable to move.”

“Is it quite incurable?” she asked again.

“We hope not; perhaps change of air may do something for her; but even at the best, it will be years before she is able to go about.”

“I am so sorry,” she said, “so very sorry. How sad for you and for her. I can understand why you want a companion for her; she can take no active share in the management of a large establishment like this.”

“No; no share at all. We will not decide anything until my sister comes; but it seems to me that she will be most thankful to have you here, that you will be more useful to her than I can say. She would not be able to see guests, give orders, or anything of that kind.”

There was a strange light in her eyes, a strange, suppressed glitter in her face.

“When will your sister come?” she inquired.

“I am going to-morrow to fetch her. There will be no need for you to make any alterations. You spoke of going away; there will be no need for that. I leave here to-morrow, and when my sister comes I suppose the sternest British propriety will be satisfied.”

She smiled.

“I suppose so, too. And Sir Barnard has not even left me a mourning-ring? Well, I have so much less to be grateful for. The old servants were all remembered, I hope?”

“All of them. I will say good-night, mademoiselle; I have much to attend to. I shall hope to find you well when I return.”

What a strange fascination her beauty had! I remember it with a shudder. Her face haunted me all night; I could not forget it.

The following morning I returned to London. I had

yet to break the news of our fortune to Clare, and make arrangements for our journey to Crown Anstey.

People who wish to be philosophers tell you money is nothing. Certainly, as far as the spiritual and higher, holier interests of life go, it is not; but as far as this world is concerned, it is almost everything. I had been poor and friendless in London, and then it had seemed to me a desert; now I had money, it was another place—bright, cheerful, every one kind and friendly. I seemed to float in sunshine; the very air around me was elastic, full of hope; every step was a pleasure. What made the difference? I was poor, and now I had money.

Clare was very pleased to see me; she cried out in astonishment at my black clothes, so new and glossy.

“Edgar,” she said, “I can not understand you. You have money, clothes. How is it? What has happened?”

I knelt down by her side and took her in my arms.

“Clare,” I said, “God has been very kind to us. All our poverty and privations are ended. Will you be calm and brave if I tell you what it is?”

“They have taken you into partnership!” she cried, rapturously. “They have found out how clever and good you are!”

In the midst of my agitation I laughed at this very un-business-like idea.

“It is better than that, Clare. There need be no more business, no more work for me. You remember hearing my mother speak of my father’s cousin, Sir Barnard Trevelyan, of Crown Anstey?”

“Yes, I just remember it,” she said. “I had almost forgotten.”

“He is dead, and, sad to say, both his sons are dead. One died with him, and one died years ago. Now do you understand?”

“No,” she replied, slowly. “They can not have left us anything, because they did not know us.”

“Sir Barnard and his only son died together, and the heir to Crown Anstey, the title, and the whole of that vast fortune is—myself.”

“You are not jesting, Edgar?”

“No; I am telling you the simple, perfect truth.” And then, when she had recovered from what to her was really a shock, I gave her the whole history.

"I hope you will like mademoiselle, Clare. She is so utterly friendless and alone that, unless we keep her with us, I do not know what is to become of her."

"I shall be sure to like her," she said. "My heart is so full of happiness that I shall love every one. Oh, Edgar, if I could but get well!"

Yes, that was the one drawback to our happiness. The bright, sweet sister, who would have enjoyed our prosperity so much, was a helpless invalid.

That same afternoon I went to the office and invited all my fellow-clerks to a sumptuous dinner at a far-famed restaurant. I made some sad hearts light and happy with my money, thank God! Poor Stephen Knowsley had a sick mother, and was three quarters behind with his rent. I gave him fifty pounds, and the tears that stood in his eyes were the sweetest thanks man could have. What gives such pleasure as plenty of money to help one's friends?

A comfortable invalid-carriage was provided for Clare, and the journey did not fatigue her. We said good-bye to the old life, the old privations, the old trials, and embarked on a new, smiling, and sunny sea.

Another week saw us comfortably settled at Crown Anstey. The first bewilderment of our new position passed away, I began to feel more at my ease as master of that magnificent mansion, and on my sister's calm face I saw already signs of returning health.

We had a grand reception when I returned with Clare to Crown Anstey. The Anstey church bells pealed out merrily; the servants were all assembled; mademoiselle, fresh and beautiful as a morning star, was in the hall.

I saw the kindly looks of commiseration that followed my sister. All the servants in the house vied with one another who should be most attentive. Coralie looked at me, with sweet, sisterly anxiety shining in her eyes.

The following day Coralie suggested we find two nice large, lofty, cheerful rooms for my sister's use. We decided upon two in the western wing—they both looked on the Queen's Terrace—large, lofty rooms, with the sun shining on them all day, each one containing two large windows, from which could be seen a glorious vista of trees and flowers.

Without saying one word to Clare, they were prepared

for her. Books, music, pictures, statues, flowers were all arranged in order; everything bright and beautiful was brought there. A small part of the room was partitioned off and made into a conservatory where she could see the flowers bloom and hear the birds sing all the day long.

I have seen many lovely places since then, but none that looked to me so bright and beautiful as my sister's rooms. All that money could do to alleviate her sufferings was done. I ordered the easiest reclining-chair, on which she could be gently moved from room to room, resolving in my own mind, no matter what went on in other parts of the house, that in her rooms there should be always sunshine and happiness.

Her joy when she was carried into them was most pretty and pathetic to see. Then, when she was fairly installed, I wrote to London for the celebrated Dr. Finlaison, and I placed her under his care. He gave me some little hope.

In the course of time, he said, with the best of attention, the most tender care, and cheerful society, she would, he believed, recover so as to be once more able to take her place in the world; and the hour in which I heard that was, I do not hesitate to say, one of the very happiest of my life.

This part of my story has been, perhaps, commonplace. There was coming for me a different phase. If my reader thinks it too romantic, I can only say—it is true.

CHAPTER V.

It was some little time before I asked Clare how she liked Coralie, then the answer was most diplomatic.

“I am so very sorry for her, Edgar, and so pleased that she has a home with us.”

She never said more than that, or less. Knowing her aimable character, I came to the conclusion that she did not like her, but was too good-natured and kind-hearted to say so.

Mademoiselle, as she was called in the household, was very kind to my sister. She engaged a maid, whose only business was to wait upon her; and more than that, she spent some hours, at least, every day in her room. She attended to her flowers, fed her birds, selected her books, played and sung to her, read to her, talked to her in her

bright, lively way, superintended her dress, so that I always saw my darling exquisitely attired; and yet I could not see that Clare liked her.

She soon made herself almost indispensable. She gave orders to the housekeeper and cook, she managed everything; she received our visitors, and entertained them with marvelous grace and courtesy; she understood all the affairs of the estate; in fact, she was, to all intents and purposes, mistress of the house.

I insisted upon making her a very handsome allowance, which, after a little resistance, she accepted.

For a time everything went on most prosperously. How I loved my new life no words of mine can tell. The luxury of having plenty of money, of being able to do what I liked with my time, of seeing my sister so happy, of being altogether without those dark fears for the future which so often beset those whose lot is hard work and very limited means—I thanked God for it all.

I had made the acquaintance of most of the tenants on the estate, and my neighbors had begun to call upon me. It was surprising how every one liked, or, I may say, loved, my sister Clare. That invalid couch of hers became a kind of center of society.

One morning I saw some cards lying on the hall table. Coralie was standing near when I took them up. “Sir John Thesiger,” “Lady Thesiger.”

“That is a new name,” I said to mademoiselle.

When she took the card from my hand and saw it, a dark look came over her face; I saw her lips close more firmly.

“Have you not heard of the Thesigers? I thought every one knew Sir John. They live at Harden Manor, about five miles from here.”

“Are they old friends of the family?” I asked.

Again the darkening look and the tightening lips.

“Both Sir Barnard and Miles knew them, but I can not say whether they were very great friends. Shall you call?”

She asked the question carelessly, but I saw she was awaiting my reply with painful anxiety.

“Yes, I shall go; I like to be on friendly and intimate terms with all my neighbors. Sir John is the Tory member for Chingwell, is he not?”

“Yes,” she replied, shortly.

“And next year I hope to be returned for Anstey, so that, of all men, I shall probably find him the most useful of acquaintances.”

She turned away, and a sudden conviction came over me that for some reason or other Coralie d'Aubergne did not like the Thesigers. I rode over to Harden Manor on the day following, and found Sir John at home.

I liked him at first sight—a frank, kind-hearted English gentleman. He was pleased to see me, and we spent some time talking over the late baronet and his son. He told me something I had not heard from Coralie—that there had been some slight misunderstanding between father and son. He asked me if I would join the ladies, who were in the drawing-room. I was only too pleased.

“Lady Thesiger was Sir Barnard's confidant. He consulted her about everything—indeed, we were such near and dear friends that you must forgive me if I can not look upon you as a stranger.”

Entering a very pretty drawing-room, long, low, and old-fashioned, I saw two ladies, one a matron, the other a lovely young girl. Sir John introduced me to his wife, and then to Agatha, his daughter.

Looking up, I saw my fate. Never believe those cold-natured, cold-hearted people who tell you that love grows from respect. It does not. It comes into existence all at once—suddenly, as a flower is kissed into color by the sun. When I entered Harden Manor, I was heart-whole, fancy-free, loving no one but Clare; after one upward look in Agatha Thesiger's face, I loved her with a love that was my doom.

Sir John looked at me in amazement.

“I—I did not know you had a daughter, Sir John.”

“Ah! but I have, and a very precious one, too. Poor Sir Barnard was very fond of Agatha; he used to call her his sunbeam. I was almost jealous of him at times.”

“There was no need, papa,” said a sweet voice, the very sound of which made me tremble.

Why had mademoiselle never mentioned this young girl, so fair, so lovely? why had she told me nothing about her? I should like to describe her, reader, so as to make you love her. She was tall, very little above the medium height, slender, graceful, with a delicate arched neck, and the “fairest face the sun e'er shone on.” Not beautiful

—that word would not describe her; fair, sweet, and lovely. She had no brilliant or vivid coloring, her complexion was clear, with the faintest rose-bloom, her eyes large and blue, her lips sweet and sensitive, a white brow, and a wealth of soft brown hair. She was no queenly beauty; she had not Coralie's brilliancy and bright coloring, but she was the fairest and most lovable girl who ever made a man's heart glad.

I did not know how the next few minutes passed. Sir John and Lady Thesiger were talking about the neighborhood, and I was thinking that if Agatha bid me lie down there at her feet and die for her sweet sake, I should do so with a smile.

When I came to my senses, Lady Thesiger was asking me if I would dine with them the week following; they were expecting some visitors from London. I am sure she must have thought me almost an imbecile, I answered her in such a confused, hesitating way.

All the time Agatha sat opposite to me, her lovely eyes drooping over the drawing on which she was engaged when I entered. I could bear it no longer; come what might, I must see those eyes. I went over and stood by her side.

Alas! I had rarely, if ever, spoken to any young ladies except Clare and Coralie. I had crossed the room purposely to speak to her. Standing by her chair, every word I had ever known in my life died from my memory, I could not think of one thing to say.

Bending over the picture, I asked if she were fond of drawing, and then I hated myself for the utter imbecility of the question.

When once the blue eyes were raised to mine all constraint died away; they kindled a fire in my heart that nothing could ever extinguish.

"Miss Thesiger," I said, "I should be so pleased if I could excite your interest in my sister."

"Have you a sister?" asked Lady Thesiger. "I did not know it; I am afraid she will think me very remiss."

I told them all about Clare, speaking, as was my fashion, with my heart upon my lips, telling them of her sweetness, her patience, her long illness, her cheerful resignation. Agatha forgot her reserve, Lady Thesiger looked deeply interested, and when I had finished speaking, the tears were in my eyes.

Lady Thesiger held out her hand.

"You have quite touched my heart, Sir Edgar; I shall not rest until I have seen Miss Trevelyan."

"Nor I," added her daughter.

I turned eagerly to her.

"You will come often to see my sister? I should be so grateful; she would welcome you so warmly. I have always longed for her to have a friend."

There was a slight constraint in the faces of mother and daughter. I wondered what it meant. Lady Thesiger was the first to speak.

"We shall be delighted to do all that lies in our power to soften Miss Trevelyan's terrible affliction. Pray, pardon me, Sir Edgar, but is Mademoiselle d'Aubergne still at Crown Anstey?"

"She is staying there as companion to my sister, who is utterly incapable of taking any share in the management of the house."

"You must find a wife," said Sir John. "I should say myself that Crown Anstey requires a mistress."

I longed to say there and then how I should pray him to give me his daughter for a wife. Our eyes met. She must have read my thoughts, for her face grew crimson, nor did I catch another glimpse of those lovely eyes during my visit.

It was with difficulty I could tear myself away. Sir John, who was a great connoisseur in horses, went with me to see Bonnie Prince. While we stood on the lawn he turned to me with a constrained smile.

"So mademoiselle is still at Crown Anstey," he said. "I suppose she is as beautiful as ever?"

"Tastes differ," I replied, oddly. "Her beauty is not according to my idea."

His kindly face cleared.

"That is right; she is of the siren order; some people would find her irresistible. Now, pardon me if I say one word. I have known the lady for five years, and know nothing against her, still mistrust her without knowing why. You are young, new to the world, new, perhaps, to the influence of great womanly beauty; keep your heart safe. Do not let Mademoiselle d'Aubergne take it from you."

"There is no fear," I replied, with a light laugh.

"Some day, Sir John, I will tell you where my heart has found its home."

"I am glad you know how to take a hint given in all kindness," he said, cordially. "As my old friend's heir and representative, my heart warms to you."

I left Harden Manor a changed man. The very earth around seemed changed to me, the sky wore a deeper blue, the grass a fairer green; there was new music in the birds' songs and in the whisper of the wind, new hope in my own heart, new beauty all around me. That was the beginning of the glamour poets call frenzy, men call love.

Mademoiselle was out on the lawn as I rode up to the door. She came to meet me, her glittering eyes on my face.

"Have you enjoyed your visit?" she asked.

"More than I ever enjoyed anything in my life. You did not tell me what a beautiful neighbor I had at Harden Manor."

"I never thought of it," she replied, carelessly. "Agatha Thesiger is only a school-girl."

"Then school-girls are very different from what I thought them," was my reply; and mademoiselle turned away with a strange smile.

CHAPTER VI.

No matter what I did, that face was always before me. If I read, it looked up at me with sweet, serene eyes from the pages of my book. It rose between me and the blue heavens. I saw it in every flower. It haunted me until I could have cried out for respite from the pleasure that was yet half pain.

Poets sing of the joy and the rapture of love. Who knows its pain? For pain it surely is when no sleep comes near you, and the every-day duties of life only weary you, and your sole desire is to dream over looks and words you can not forget. It is surely pain when a thousand doubts assail you, when you weigh yourself in the balance and find yourself wanting.

A hundred times each day I found myself wondering whether Sir John would think me good enough for his daughter. She was not his heiress, I knew, for he had a son at college, but she was lovely, high-born, accomplished,

and my one great puzzle was whether he would think me a good match for her.

Other doubts came to madden me. Perhaps she was already engaged. She had doubtless a number of admirers. Who was I that I should dare to hope for her favor?

It was only two days since I had seen her, and I longed to see her again. A fierce, wild desire to look once more into that sweet face took possession of me. When my longing was gratified, the very gates of Paradise seemed opened to me. One beautiful morning Lady Thesiger and Agatha came over to Crown Anstey.

It so happened that I was in Clare's room when they arrived, and Coralie, too, was there, attending to the flowers, giving them fresh water, cutting off dead leaves, and gathering the fairest buds.

Lady Thesiger and Miss Thesiger were suddenly announced. Clare looked eagerly, and I just caught the dark, bitter expression on Coralie's face; then they entered. As a matter of course, I introduced Lady Thesiger first. She stooped down to kiss the sweet face that seemed to win universal love. Then I remember taking Agatha's hand, and leading her up to Clare. What could they have thought of me? I forgot everything, except that the two women I loved best were there together.

Lady Thesiger then turned toward mademoiselle. There was no kindly hand extended, no warm greeting, no friendly words. Lady Thesiger made the most formal of bows, Coralie returned it by one more formal still, Agatha did the same, and a strange, constrained silence fell upon us all.

Without a word mademoiselle quitted the room. The beauty of her face was not pleasant in that moment; there was a glitter in her eye, a compression of her lips that might have told any one to beware.

Lady Thesiger became her own natural self after Coralie's departure; she talked so kindly to Clare that I could have kissed her hand in gratitude.

I took Miss Thesiger to show her my sister's flowers; for no word of mine would those lovely eyes look up. She was not shy, her grace of manner was too perfect for that, but she was evidently afraid to look at me, and I reproached myself that I had perhaps frightened her at first.

Patiently I showed her flower after flower, perfect bud

and perfect blossom, the little white doves I had tamed, the birds of bright plumage I had bought to amuse my sister. I showed her the little fountains that rippled all day, the rocks and ferns. She admired everything.

"Your sister must be happy in spite of her illness," she said to me.

But I could bear those drooping eyes no longer.

"Miss Thesiger," I said, hurriedly, "do not be unkind to me. I know I am very presumptuous, but do, pray do, give me one kind look before you go."

Then she raised her eyes and looked at me. Alas! my tell-tale face. They fell again, and the crimson flush mounted to her white brow. I could say no more to her after that. She went to her mother's side, and they talked to Clare until it was time for lunch.

I asked if they would remain and take lunch with my sister. They consented, and when it was arranged I sent to ask Coralie if she would join us. Her answer was that she was busily engaged, and begged we would excuse her. Again I felt sure that Lady Thesiger looked considerably relieved.

Every moment I was falling more deeply and more helplessly in love, and yet across all my rapturous thoughts of Agatha came doubt and wonder as to why they did not like Coralie.

Strange; she had the beauty of a siren, the grace and wit of a queen of society, the talents and accomplishments of a complete woman of the world, yet no one seemed to like her. How could it be?

Lady Thesiger rose at last, declaring that she was ashamed of the length of her visit. When they were gone I went back to Clare. She looked up at me with a smile; there was a bright flush of animation on her face.

"How much I like them, Edgar; how kind Lady Thesiger is, and Agatha! Oh, brother, how I wish that I had a sister like her!"

I thought I would ask her to solve my doubt.

"Clare," I said, gravely, "I want you to explain something to me. You, being a woman, can understand women. Tell me how it is no one likes Coralie. She is beautiful and clever, why is it no one cares for her?"

My sister looked at me uneasily.

"I can not tell. I wish you would not ask me, Edgar."

“Nay; tell me what you think?”

“Then I fancy it must be because she is not quite sincere. I do not like saying anything so unkind. You must not let it prejudice you against her; but she gives me always the impression of a person who leads two lives—one that everybody sees, and one that nobody understands save herself.”

“How old should you imagine her to be?” I asked; and again my sister looked uneasily at me.

“We have been in the habit of considering her a young girl,” she replied, “but do you know, Edgar, I believe she is more than thirty.”

“It is impossible!” I cried. “Why, Clare, she does not look a day more than eighteen.”

“She is what the French people call well preserved. She will look no older for the next ten years. She has a girl’s figure and a girl’s face, but a woman’s heart, Edgar. I’m sure of it.”

“She is thirty, you say, and has been here for five years; that would make her a woman of twenty-five before she left France. A French woman of twenty-five has lived her life.”

“That is just what I mean,” she replied. “Rely upon it, for all her girlish face and girlish ways, Coralie d’Aubergne has lived hers.”

“Clare,” I asked, half shyly, “how do you like Miss Thesiger?”

A look bright as a sunbeam came over my sister’s face.

“Ah! hers is a beautiful nature—sweet, frank, candid, transparent—no two lives there, Edgar. Her face is as pure as a lily, and her soul is the same. No need to turn from me, dear, I read your secret when she came in. If you give me such a sister as that, I shall be grateful to you.”

“Then you think there might be some chance for me if I asked her to become my wife?”

“Assuredly. Why not?”

She said no more, for at that moment Coralie returned; she had been in the garden gathering some flowers for Clare; the brightest bloom was on her face, the brightest light was in her eye. Looking at her, it was impossible to believe that she was anything but a light-hearted, happy girl.

She glanced round the room.

"Your visitors are gone," she said. "I felt sure they were staying for dinner."

"Coralie," I asked, "Lady Thesiger tells me she has been here a great deal, yet you do not seem to be on very intimate terms with her?"

"No," she said, with that frank smile that was lovely enough to charm any one. "I neither like nor admire Lady Thesiger."

Clare uttered a little cry of astonishment.

"Why not?" I asked.

"I should not like to prejudice you against them, Sir Edgar; but as you ask me, I will tell you. The Thesigers have but one object."

"What is it?" I inquired, for she had paused abruptly, and seemed to be entirely engrossed in her flowers.

"The one aim they have had in view for several years past is to see Agatha mistress of Crown Anstey. She was educated solely and entirely for that purpose."

"I do not believe it!" cried Clare, indignantly.

"I should never expect you to do so. You are too unworldly, too good; you know nothing of the manners of fashionable people. Sir Barnard knew it. They fairly hunted him down; they were always driving over here, or asking Sir Barnard and Miles there; they were continually contriving fresh means to throw Miles and Agatha together."

I would not please her by showing my anger.

"Perhaps," I said, carelessly, "Miles admired her; he may even have been her lover."

She turned to me with a strange, glittering smile, a look I could not fathom on her face.

"No," she replied; "Miles knew all about it; he was too sensible to be caught by the insipid charms of a mere school-girl. Sir Barnard was not so wise; he would have liked to join the two estates—he spoke of it very often—but Miles never gave the matter a serious thought."

There was such ill-concealed bitterness in her words and look, such malice in that glittering smile, I turned away half in disgust.

"All our neighbors understand Lady Thesiger's politics," she continued; "they have been a source of great amusement for some time."

“Miss Thesiger is not a day above eighteen,” I said, fairly angry at last, “so that there can not have been much time for maneuvering.”

“Ah!” she said, “how I admire you, Sir Edgar. That simple, noble faith you have in women is most beautiful to me; one sees it so seldom in those who have lived always among fashionable men and women.”

A little speech that was intended to remind me how strange and fresh I was to this upper world. I began to find something like dislike to mademoiselle growing up in my mind, but I spoke to her of the Thesigers no more.

CHAPTER VII.

IT seems an unmanly thing to write of a woman—my own face flushes hotly as I write the words—but to make my story plain the truth must be told. I could not help seeing that Coralie d’Aubergne was growing to like me very much.

To describe how a man woos a woman is a task pleasant enough. It is natural and beautiful; he is in his place then, and she in hers; but who would not shrink from the hateful task of describing how a woman woos a man!

God bless all women, say I. My life has been a long one, and my experience of them bids me say they are almost all angels. I have found them true, tender, and earnest. I could tell stories of women’s quiet heroism that would move any one’s heart. God bless them one and all—they are the chief comfort in life.

Still even I, who love and respect them so much, am compelled to own that there are women wanting in purity and goodness, in modesty and reserve. I grieve to say Coralie d’Aubergne was one of them. She pursued me; and yet it was all so quietly done that she left me no room to speak—no ground on which to interfere.

If I went out in the gloaming to smoke my cigar, as I liked best to do among the sighs of the roses, in a few minutes that beautiful fair face was sure to be smiling at my side. She had a pretty, picturesque way of throwing a black lace shawl over her shoulders and of draping it round her head, so making her face look a thousand times more fair.

She would come to me with that graceful, easy, dignified walk of hers, and say:

“If I am not intruding, Sir Edgar, I should enjoy a few minutes with you.”

She had a wonderful gift of conversation—piquant, sparkling, and intellectual. If I had not been the dullest of the dull, I should have known that such a woman would not pass her life as a companion without she had some wonderful end in view. She was far too brilliant. She would have made a good embassadress, for she could make herself all things to all men. No matter what subject interested you, on that she could speak. She seemed to understand every one intuitively; one's likes, dislikes, tastes. She had a wondrous power of reading character. She was worldly with the worldly, good with the good, romantic with the young, sensible with the old. To me she was always the same. Sometimes, when I saw her coming to meet me along those paths where the rose leaves lay dead, I felt inclined to go away and leave her; but natural politeness came to my aid. Then when she had talked to me for a few minutes, a strange, subtle charm would steal over me.

I knew her well-chosen compliments were all flattery. I knew she was pursuing me for some object of her own. Yet that charm no words can describe was stronger than my reason. Away from her I disliked her, my judgment was all against her; in her presence no man could well help being fascinated.

I thank Heaven that I had the shield of a pure and holy love; I was but a weak man, and nothing else saved me. If there came a wet day, or one that was not pleasant for walking, she had a thousand ways of making time fly. She played billiards as well as any man; she read aloud more beautifully and perfectly than I have ever heard any one else. She made every room she entered cheerful; she had a fund of anecdote that never seemed to be exhausted.

But the time she liked best for weaving her spells was after sunset, before the lamps were lighted.

“You are fond of music, Sir Edgar,” she would say to me. “Come, and I will sing you some songs I used to sing years ago.”

And she did sing. Listening to her I could well believe in the far-famed Orpheus's lute. It was enough to bewil-

der any man. She had a sweet, rich voice, a contralto of no ordinary merit, and the way in which she used it was something never to be forgotten.

There was a deep bay-window in the drawing-room, my favorite nook; from it there was a splendid view of waving trees and blooming flowers. She would place my chair there for me, and then sing until she sung my senses away. There was such power, such pathos, such passion in her voice that no one could listen to it unmoved.

Then, when she had sung until my very senses were steeped in the sweet madness of her music, she would come and sit, sometimes by my side, sometimes on a 'Turkish cushion at my feet.

And then—well, I do not like to say more, but as women can woo, she wooed me. Sometimes her hand, so warm and soft, would touch mine; sometimes, to see what I was reading, she would bend over me until her hair brushed my cheek and the perfume of the flowers she always wore reached me.

Thank God, I say again, that I was shielded by a pure love.

"How I love Crown Anstey," she said to me one evening; "if I were asked to choose between being crowned Queen of Great Britain, or mistress of Crown Anstey, I should prefer to remain here."

How well I remember that evening! The golden summer was dying then; the flowers seemed to be yielding all their sweetest perfumes to it; there was a lovely light from the evening sky that lingered on the tufted lime-trees; the birds were singing a faint, sweet vesper hymn; the time so soon was coming when they were to cross the sunny seas in search of warmer climes.

I had been reading to Clare, but she did not seem to be quite so well, and asked to be left alone.

"Let Coralie play and sing for you, Edgar," she said; "I shall hear the faint sound of it, and it will make me happy, because I shall know that you are well amused."

I did not like to tell her how distasteful Coralie's playing and singing were to me. We went into the drawing-room together. I saw how everything was prepared for me; there were fresh flowers, my favorite periodicals, my favorite chair, placed in the nook I liked best.

"I shall sing you some gay French *chansons*," said

Coralie, "and we will leave the door open so that Clare may hear them."

A few moments later and I was in an atmosphere of delight. The rich sweet music rose and fell, it cheered me like strong wine.

Then after a time its character changed; it was no longer gay, triumphant, and mirthful. The very spirit of love and pathos seemed to breathe through it. My heart beat, every nerve thrilled, every sense answered to those sweet, soft words.

It ceased then, and Coralie came over to the bay-window. She sat down upon the Turkish cushions, and looked with longing eyes at the light on the trees and flowers. There was a softened expression on her face, a flush as of awakened emotion, a new and brighter light in those dark, dangerous eyes. The white fingers trembled, the white bosom heaved as though she had felt deeply the words she had been singing.

Then it was she said she would rather be mistress of Crown Anstey than Queen of Great Britain.

I laughed, not knowing what to say.

"Crown Anstey ought to thank you very much," I said. "You pay it a great compliment."

"My heart is here," she continued, those dreamy eyes still fixed upon mine. "I think if any one were to say to me, 'You must leave Crown Anstey,' I should die."

All the music on earth seemed embodied in those few words.

"I should die," she repeated, "just as a flower dies when it is torn from the soil where it has taken deep root."

"Why do you speak of such things?" I asked. "No one thinks of your going; this is your home."

"In my happiest hours the fear lies heaviest upon me," she replied. "No one has ever spoken of my going, that is true; but I have common sense, and common sense tells me, if certain events happen, I must go."

"What events do you mean?" I asked, all unconsciously.

She sighed deeply.

"If you were to be married, Sir Edgar—Cousin Edgar, I like to say best—then I must go."

"I do not see the necessity."

“Ah! you do not understand; women are all jealous. I have grown so accustomed to perform a hundred little services for you, they make the pleasure and sunshine of my life. To be able to do some little thing to help you is the highest earthly joy that I can ever know. When you are married, Sir Edgar, your wife will take all this happiness from me.”

“I do not see why,” I replied, dryly, inwardly wishing myself safe in Clare’s room.

“Ah! you do not understand—men never can understand the love of women. Wives, above all, are so very jealous. Fancy, if ever I wanted to make your tea, or get anything ready for you, she would be angry and I should be wretched.”

“In that case you must make tea for Clare instead of me.”

“If I am anywhere near you, I must always attend to you before every one and anything in the wide world,” she said, impulsively.

“You are making very sure that my wife will not like you,” I said. “What if I have no wife?”

She shook her head gravely.

“You will marry, Sir Edgar. All the Trevelyans of Crown Anstey marry, as becomes the head of a grand old family. You will marry, and your wife will be the happiest woman in the world.”

“I may be a modern Bluebeard, Coralie.”

“No; you will not. Ah, me! To go away and leave Crown Anstey—to leave you—I shall feel like Eve driven forth from Paradise to die.”

My hand lay carelessly on the back of a chair. She bent down swiftly and laid her burning lips upon it. I would not tell—my face flames as I write the word—but unless you know all, reader, you will not understand my story.

She laid her warm, soft lips upon it; and though I did not love her—did not even trust her—the magnetic touch thrilled every nerve. I took my hand away.

“Ah, cousin!” she said, looking at me with those dark, dangerous eyes, “you love even your dog Hector better than me.”

She was so near to me that the perfume from her flowers reached me. It was by a desperate effort I broke the spell.

"This room is insufferably warm," I said; "I am going into the garden. You had better see if Clare wants anything, Coralie."

So, like many another man, I ran away, not knowing how to meet my fair adversary on equal grounds.

CHAPTER VIII.

WALKING among the whispering leaves, the conclusion I came to was that I must take some precaution, or Coralie d'Aubergne would marry me, whether I was willing or not. A siren is a faint shadow compared with a beautiful woman resolved to win a man whether he wants winning or not.

Why not risk my fate and ask Agatha to be my wife? There was a faint hope in my heart that she would not refuse me, yet she was so modest, so retiring, that though I had most perseveringly sought her favor since the first moment I had seen her, I could not tell whether she cared for me or not.

To judge by Coralie's standard, she did not like me. In all our conversation it half maddened me to see the lovely eyes I loved so dearly dropped shyly away from me.

It may not be a very elegant comparison, but she always reminded me of some shy, beautiful bird. She had a bright, half-startled way of looking at me. Several times, when I met her suddenly, I saw the lovely face flush and the little hands tremble.

Did she love me, or did she not? I could not tell. Of whom should I take counsel? There was a bird singing over me; I wondered if that sweet night-song was all of love. Alas! that I had not been more into the world of women—their ways and fashions were all mysteries to me.

"Faint heart never won fair lady," says the old proverb, and it ran through my mind. I resolved to try my fortune. If she did not love me, why then, life held nothing more for me. If I could not win her, I would never ask the love of woman more, but live out my life with Clare.

Like many other anxious lovers, I lay awake all night, wondering what I should say to her, how I should woo her, in what words I should ask her to be my wife. When day dawned I was still undecided, only that it was to be.

“You are going away early,” said Coralie, as I ordered my horse. “Surely you will not be away all day, Sir Edgar?”

“I am going to Harden Manor, and can not say when I shall return. Do not wait dinner for me—I may dine there.”

“It will be a long, dark day,” she said, with a sigh. “Do not be late—every hour will seem like two.”

She hovered round me, asking many questions, evidently seeking to know my business there. When my horse was brought to the door, she came to me with a delicate spray of heliotrope. Never had she looked so beautiful. Her dark, radiant eyes, full of fire and tenderness, were raised to mine; there was a charming flush on her face, her white fingers held the flower almost caressingly.

“Let me fasten this in your coat, Sir Edgar. No gentleman looks completely dressed without a flower. You do not know what heliotrope means. Men never—or, at least, very seldom—care for the sweetest of all languages—the language of flowers. What that heliotrope means, cousin, I say to you.”

It was not until some weeks afterward that, looking quite accidentally over an old book, I discovered the spray of heliotrope meant, “I love you.”

The beautiful picture of this fair, passionate woman died from my mind as I went to seek one a thousand times more fair. How well I remember the day—the golden sunshine, the fragrant wind, the blooming flowers, as I rode forth to win my love! It seemed to me that the summer skies smiled on me, and the singing-birds wished me joy.

The way to Harden Manor lay through green flowery lanes and a shady high-road. It seemed long, because my heart sighed to be with her; yet short, because I was so uncertain what to say, and how my wooing would end.

I reached the manor at last. Sir John was from home. Lady Thesiger and Agatha were busily engaged in making pretty fancy articles for a grand fancy fair that was to be held—for the benefit of some out-of-the-way people—by special permission of His Grace the Duke of Fairholme in the grounds of Fairholme Castle.

Lady Thesiger looked up when I entered with a smile.

“Good-morning, Sir Edgar; I am very glad to see you.

Agatha and I were just wishing we had a gentleman to help us. Are you willing to assist us for a day?"

My face flushed hotly with delight.

"Am I willing to give myself a day of Utopian delight, Lady Thesiger? Most certainly. I will do anything—I can be very useful. I can mount drawings, frame photographs, sketch and design, and my humble talents are all yours."

Then Agatha looked at me, and the glance of those eyes was so sweet I almost lost myself.

"The Cherokee Indians, or whatever they are called, will be much obliged to you," she said. "I can not call working for them 'Utopian delight,' my fingers ache with this stiff card-board."

"You willfully misunderstand me, Miss Thesiger; the delight consists in being with you, not in working for the Cherokees. Save that I shudder when I hear that they have eaten a missionary, they have no particular interest for me."

Lady Thesiger smiled.

"You must work, not talk, Sir Edgar. Sit down here, pray, and if you think Miss Trevelyan will be uneasy, I will send a servant to tell her that you will remain here for lunch and for dinner."

"I prepared her for that emergency; now give me something to do for the Cherokees."

My hands were soon filled. It was pleasant sitting there in that fragrant, sunny drawing-room, with two of the most gracious and graceful women in England. Yet it was hard. I had gone there purposely to tell the story of my love, and now I was condemned to sit for hours by Agatha's side and say nothing to her.

"Perhaps fortune may favor me," I thought; "Lady Thesiger may leave the room, and then I will not lose a moment."

How fervently I blessed these Cherokees before the day ended, no one will ever know. Lady Thesiger never left us; Agatha worked very hard. Looking at the sweet, calm, high-bred face, I wondered if she knew that a lover, with his heart on fire, sat near her.

Lunch came—we went to the dining-room. Lady Thesiger told us we had only half an hour to spare; she had

promised the duchess to send everything in that evening, and she did not wish to break her word.

"It is worse than slavery," I said; and Lady Thesiger laughed, little knowing why I was so impatient.

Back again to work. Happily, all was finished, and the servants were called in to pack the petty, fragile articles.

"Now I shall have five minutes," I thought to myself, "and I will find out whether she cares for me or not."

Alas! there was the dressing-bell. "We have just finished in time for dinner," said Lady Thesiger. "Sir John will not be at home; he does not return until late."

I was tortured with impatience. Had I been waiting for a verdict over life or death, my agony would not have been one half so great.

The long ordeal of dinner had to pass.

"You will allow me to go to the drawing-room with you," I said to the mistress of the house. "I could not sit here alone."

Then I saw a chance. Agatha went to the piano and played one of Mendelssohn's "Songs Without Words." The difference between the pure, sweet, high-bred English girl and the brilliant, seductive French woman never appeared to me so great as when they were at the piano. Coralie's music wrapped one's soul, steeped one's senses, brought one nearer to earth; Agatha's took one almost straight to heaven. Listening to her, pure and holy thoughts came, high and noble impulses.

Then, seeing that Lady Thesiger looked tired, I suggested that she should rest upon the sofa while I took Miss Thesiger for a little stroll through the gardens. The evening was beautifully warm and clear, the golden sun lingering as though loath to leave the fair world to darkness.

At last, at last! My hands trembled with impatience as I drew the black lace mantilla over her white shoulders. At last, at last I had her all to myself; only the birds and flowers around us; only the blue sky overhead.

Then, when I would have given worlds for the power of speech, a strange, dull silence came over me.

"Agatha," I said at last, "I came over to-day on purpose to see you. I want to ask you something, a favor so great my lips can hardly frame the words."

She looked at me. There was infinite wonder, infinite gentleness in her eyes. I took courage then and told my tale in burning words. I can not remember now, but I told her how I had loved her from the first moment I had ever seen her, and had resolved upon winning her, if she was to be won.

Never mind what passed. I only know the sun never shone so brightly, the flowers were never one half so fair, the world so bright, no man ever one half so happy.

For she—well, she had listened to me, and her sweet lips had quivered, her beautiful face had grown tender and soft; she laid her little white hands in mine and said she loved me.

I have wondered since that the weight of my own happiness did not break my heart, the suspense had been so great.

“You love me? Say it again, Agatha. I can not believe it. Oh, my darling, it seemed to me easier to reach the golden stars than to win you!”

“You did not try,” she said, with a smile half sweet, half divine. “You always looked frightened at me.”

“So I was, but I shall grow bolder now. Such beauty, such purity, such goodness as yours would awe any one. I can hardly believe now in my own good fortune. Say it again, darling.”

She raised her sweet face to mine.

“I love you,” she said, simply; and it seemed to me the words died away in the summer wind more sweetly than an echo from heaven would die.

“And you will be my wife? Agatha, promise me.”

“I will be your wife,” she said; and then, to my thinking, we went straight away to fairy-land.

I do not remember the sun setting, although it must have set; for when my senses returned to me, a servant was standing before us, saying that Lady Thesiger was afraid it was growing cold.

There lay the dew shining on the trees and flowers, yet we had not even seen it fall.

CHAPTER IX.

I WOULD not leave the manor house until I had seen Sir John. Agatha did not go back to the drawing-room with me.

“What will mamma think?” she said, in utter dismay. “See how late it is; and the dew has fallen.”

“I will tell her why I detained you, Agatha. You are sure that I shall not wake up to-morrow and find all this is a dream?”

“I do not think so,” she replied; and then she would not stop for another word, and I went in to meet Lady Thesiger alone.

She was surprised when I told her. No matter what Coralie said about maneuvering, if ever I saw real genuine surprise in any woman’s face, it was in Lady Thesiger’s this evening.

“You have asked Agatha to marry you!” she repeated, looking half bewildered; “and pray, Sir Edgar, what did the child say?”

“She promised to marry me,” I replied, more boldly; “that is, of course, if Sir John and you, Lady Thesiger, have no objection.”

“I am afraid that you have not taken that much into consideration. Asked the child to marry you! Why, Sir Edgar, how long have you been in love with her?”

“From the very first moment I ever saw her.”

“Why,” cried her ladyship, “Sir John told me you were in love, and had promised to confide in him.”

Remembering what I had said to him, I explained to her that in speaking as I had done I referred entirely to Agatha.

“It is so utterly unexpected,” she said, “that you must pardon my strange reception of your intelligence.”

She sat quite silent for some minutes, then continued:

“It seems so strange for you to fall in love with Agatha. The dearest wish of Sir Barnard’s heart was to have her for a daughter-in-law.”

A fierce spasm of jealousy almost robbed me of my breath.

“Did she—did she—”

Then I could get no further.

"No, Agatha did not like Miles, if that is what you mean."

"Did Miles love her?"

"I can not tell—there was something very mysterious about him. He looked to me like one who had a secret on his mind. I have often wondered what it could be. He was not a happy man of late years."

"You have not told me yet, Lady Thesiger, if I have your good wishes."

She held out her hand with a gracious, kindly smile.

"Shall I tell you the truth—no flattery, but just the simple truth? I would rather Agatha married you than any other man in the nation. She has not only my full consent, but I am pleased, proud, and happy."

"And Sir John, shall I have his consent?"

"There is little doubt of it. I hear him now—he has just arrived, I suppose. You shall see him at once."

I rode away from Harden Manor that night a happy man. Sir John, like Lady Thesiger, gave his full, free, unhesitating consent. We had a long, confidential conversation. He told me how his affairs stood. He was a wealthy man, but his expenses were great. He told me frankly that he should not be able to give Agatha a large portion at her marriage, nor could he leave her anything considerable at his death. Harden Manor, with its rich revenues, was all entailed on his son.

"So that I am glad, Sir Edgar," he said, "she is likely to marry a rich man. She has been brought up in all luxury, and would never be able to bear privation. I shall feel satisfied of her future now."

Alas! so did I. I rode home through the sweet gathering gloom and the starlight one of the happiest men in England. I had won my love. She loved me whom I loved best.

There seemed to be nothing wanting then. Two short years ago I was poor, my daily life one of monotonous toil, without the least hope of relief. Now the silvery moon fell upon the woods and silvered the roof of the grand old mansion, and all this fair land over which I was riding was mine.

Coralie was waiting for me. She affected to be just crossing the hall, but I knew that she had been waiting

there to have the first word with me. She looked eagerly into my face.

"How long you have been away, Sir Edgar! Surely the starlight agrees with you. I have coffee ready for you in the drawing-room—you have dined, I suppose?"

"Yes, I dined at Harden Manor. I have been there all day."

A dark cloud came for a moment over her radiant face.

"All day," she repeated. "Ah, poor Miles! If he rode over in the morning, they were sure to make him stay till the evening, if they could."

"If Miles found the place as pleasant as I do, the length of his visits would not surprise me," I said, laughingly. "I will run up to see Clare first, and then try your coffee, Coralie."

I longed to tell my good news to my sister.

"Clare," I said, kneeling by her side, "look at me. Do you know, can you guess, what news I have to tell you?"

She raised her eyes to mine, she laid her dear hand on my brow.

"I can guess," she said, quietly. "You have told Agatha you love her, and have asked her to be your wife. Is that it?"

"Yes. She has promised, Clare. She loves me—she whom I have always looked up to as some queen so far above me."

"Any good woman would love you, Edgar," said my sister. She hesitated, then asked, slowly: "Have you said anything to Coralie?"

"Certainly not. Why should I?"

A delicate color flushed my sister's face.

"To tell you the truth," she replied, "I have fancied of late that Coralie likes you. Nay, I need not mince matters; I am quite sure she loves you."

"She loves us both, because we are all in the world she has to love; but not in the way you mean, Clare."

But Clare shook her head doubtfully.

"I hope I may be mistaken; but, Edgar, I have a nervous feeling about it, difficult to describe and hard to bear, as though evil would come to you through her. I can not tell you how the thought haunts and perplexes me."

I laughed, little dreaming how it would be.

“Sheer nervous fancy, Clare. Take it at the very worst, that Coralie does like me, perhaps, a little too well, and is both piqued and angry at my engagement, in the name of common sense, I ask you, what possible harm can she do to me?”

“None that I can see; yet the dread lies heavy upon me, brother.”

“You will forget it all, darling, when you hear the chime of wedding-bells. Ah, Clare, if you could get better, I should not have a wish left ungratified!”

Then, still smiling at Clare’s nervous fancy, I went into the drawing-room. Coralie was there awaiting me. The picture, in all its details, rises before me as vividly as though I had only seen it yesterday.

Although the day had been warm, the evening was chilly, and a small fire burned brightly in the grate; the lamps were lighted, and gleamed like huge, soft, warm pearls; the air of the room was heavy with sweet and subtle perfume. I have seen no woman who could arrange flowers like Coralie. The way in which she gathered them, and placed each fragrant flower so that it could be most perfectly seen, was wonderful. Great masses of crimson against white, amber, and blue. She had the instinctive elegance of a true Parisienne.

It struck me as I entered that I had never seen so many lovely flowers; the vases and the stands were all full. Coralie herself sat in a large velvet fauteuil, the rich color of which formed a magnificent background to her bright face and golden-brown hair. She was dressed with unusual elegance; a robe of soft black crape fell in graceful folds around her. I never shall understand ladies’ dresses, but this was made so that the beautiful white neck and arms were bare.

I remember, too, that she had great sprays of heliotrope in the bodice of her dress and in her hair. She looked more lovely, more seductive than any words of mine could describe, if I wrote for six months.

On the table by her side was a tray set with delicate china and silver, over which the fire-light played cheerily. It was a picture of luxurious home comfort. She looked up as I entered with a grave, sweet smile.

“Your coffee is ready, Sir Edgar.”

There was my favorite chair drawn up to the table. As I sat down, I said aloud:

"This is comfortable."

Her smile brightened and deepened.

"You are like Miles, Sir Edgar. No matter where he went, he always said coming home was the most pleasant part of the day."

Then with her white jeweled hand she poured out my coffee, and certainly the aromatic fragrance was very pleasant.

"You must be like Miles in something else," she said. "He always declared that I made better coffee than any one else—better than he tasted in all his travels. Do you not think the same?" And she looked at me as anxiously as though the making of coffee to please me were the chief aim of life.

"Was Sir John at home?" she asked, after a few minutes.

Then I had to describe my day, to give her a history of the coming fancy fair, in which she affected great interest.

"I should like to go very much," she said. "I have read in fashionable novels of fancy fairs, but I have never seen one. Are you going, Sir Edgar?"

"Lady Thesiger has asked my assistance, and I have promised it. We shall make up a party. If you wish to go, Coralie, you shall."

She thanked me, and when I had finished my coffee, rang the bell and ordered it to be cleared away.

"I am going to sing to you," she said. "I know you are tired. Throw your head back, shut your eyes, and listen. Do not speak, because I am going to weave a charm for you."

I declare before Heaven that when I remember the magic of that charm my heart beats even now with fear!

Are you keenly sensitive to music, reader? If so, you will understand. I could neither sing nor play, but I loved music with a perfect passion. There was not a nerve or pulse in my body, not a thrill in my heart, that did not answer it. Listening to beautiful music, sweet, soothing, and sad, this world fell from me. I was in an ideal life, with vague, glorious fancies floating round me, beautiful, lofty dreams filling my whole soul.

In this higher world Coralie's music wrapped me; then

I came to myself with a sudden start, for there was Coralie half kneeling by my side, covering my hand with kisses and tears.

CHAPTER X.

“CORALIE!” I cried, in surprise. “What is the matter? What are you doing?”

She looked up at me, the fire of her eyes flashing through the mist of tears.

“Don’t scold me, Edgar; it is the fault of the music. It sent me here to tell you how dearly I love you, and to ask from you one kind word.”

I was terribly embarrassed. Could it be possible this beautiful woman was confessing her love for me?

“Do not judge me hastily,” she said. “I am not like the fair, cold girls of this northern clime. My father had Spanish blood in his veins, and some of it flows in mine. My music went deep into my heart, and my heart cried aloud for one kind word from you.”

“Am I not always kind, Coralie?”

“Ah, yes, with that cold, English kindness which kills even sooner than your keen frost and biting winds. I want something more than this cruel kindness. Oh, cousin, can you not see I love you? I love you—ah, Heaven, how dearly!—and I want your love in return.”

Believe me, reader, I was speechless. I would fain have raised her, have told her, in short, sharp words that what she was saying branded her as unmaidenly and indiscreet; but I was powerless either to move or to speak.

“I loved you,” she said, “the first moment I saw you. You are not like other men, Sir Edgar. You are so generous, so simply truthful, so noble. No wonder that I love you; no wonder that I look proud of my love. Ah, me! ah, me! would that I knew how to tell you! Give me your love; you shall never repent it. I will make home heaven for you. Men say that I have beauty and talent. Ah, me! I would use every gift I have for you; help you to win high honors that cold, unambitious natures never dream of. Ah, love me, love me, cousin! You will find no one else so true.”

Her face paled with passion; her glorious eyes, dim with tears, were raised to mine.

"Forgive me that I have spoken first. I should have died with my love. I know that other women in my place would have done so. I could not; life is strong within me. I could not die here, tortured to death by inches, without telling you. Ah, say to me that I shall not die!"

Weak words of mine can not tell the passionate music of her voice, the passionate beauty of her face.

"You do not speak to me; you can not forgive me that I have not borne my love and sorrow in silence until it killed me. Ah, see what love must mine be to make me so speak to you, to make me kneel to you, asking for my life, my life!" and as she uttered the words her head dropped on my arm, and her wealth of golden-brown hair fell over me.

God knows I would have given worlds to have rushed away. Never was man more unwillingly drawn into an embarrassing situation. And that very day Agatha had promised to be my wife. It was high time I said something. Gently as my patience and embarrassment would allow me, I raised the girl.

"Coralie," I said, gravely, "you are not yourself, I am sure."

"It is for my life," she said. "I am asking for my life!"

"You are easily excited and impulsive," I said; "that music has bewildered you. I do love you, Coralie; so does Clare. You are our kinswoman and our charge; how can we help loving you?"

"Ah, me!" she moaned, "you will not understand; it is not that love, Edgar. I want to pass my life by your side. I want your joys to be mine—your sorrows to be mine, darling; I want to share your interests. Will you not understand?"

"I do understand, Coralie. All the love of my heart is given—gone from me. Only this day I asked Miss Thesiger to be my wife, and she consented. All my love, my faith, my loyalty is hers."

I shall never forget how that fair woman rose and looked at me. The love-light and the mist of tears died from her eyes. All the lovely color faded from her face.

"You have slain me; you have given me my death-blow."

"Nay, Coralie, you are too sensible and brave."

She waved her hand with a gesture commanding silence.

"Do not seek to comfort me," she said; "you can not. I have humiliated myself in vain. I have shown the depth of my heart, the very secrets of my soul, only that you may laugh at me with your fair-faced Agatha."

"Hush, Coralie; you have no right to say such things; what you have just said will never pass my lips. I shall not even think of it. You can not suspect me of the meanness to talk to Miss Thesiger of anything of the kind."

She looked at me with a dazed face, as though she could barely grasp my meaning.

"Tell me it again," she said. "I can not believe it."

"Listen, Coralie: I love Agatha Thesiger with all my heart, and hope very soon to make her my wife. I love her so dearly that I have no room in my heart for even a thought of any other woman."

Her face grew ghastly in its pallor.

"That is sufficient," she said; "now I understand."

"We will both forget what has been said to-night, Coralie, we will never think of it, but for the future be good cousins and good friends."

"No," she said, proudly, "there can be no friendship between us."

"You will think better of it; believe me, you have no truer friends than Clare and myself."

"If I ask for bread and you give me a stone, is that anything to make me grateful? But I declare to you, Sir Edgar Trevelyan, that you have slain me, you have slain the womanhood in me to-night by the most cruel blow."

She looked so wild, so white, so despairing, I went up to her.

"Coralie," I said, "forget all this nonsense and be your own bright self again."

"My own bright self will never live again; a man's scorn has killed me."

Suddenly, before I knew what she was doing, she had flung herself in a fearful passion of tears in my arms. She was sobbing with her face close to mine and her hot hands clinging to me.

"With it all, Edgar, she does not love you; she loved Miles; she loves Crown Anstey, and not you. Forget her, dear; give her up. I love you. She is cold, and formal,

and prudish; she is not capable of loving you as I do. She loves your fortune, not you, and I—oh, I would die if you bid me. Give her up, Edgar, and love me.”

When the passionate outburst of tears had had full vent, I unclasped her arms and placed her in a chair.

“Let us talk reasonably, Coralie. You ask me what is impossible. I shall never, with life, give up my engagement to Miss Thesiger.”

A strange, bitter smile parted her white lips. I knew afterward what that meant.

“It is better to speak plainly,” I continued, “in a case like this; better for both. Listen to me, and believe, Coralie, that even had I never seen Miss Thesiger, I—forgive me, but it is the truth—I should never have loved you with more than a cousin’s love; my friendship, my esteem, my care are all yours; more I can never give you.”

Pray God I may never see another woman as I saw her then. She rose with her white face and glittering eyes. Then came to mind that line:

“Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned.”

“You throw the love I have offered you back in my face, Sir Edgar?”

“No, dear; I lay it kindly and gratefully in your hands, to make the joy and happiness of some good man’s life.”

“You distinctly tell me that you never did—never could love me?”

“I love you as my cousin, Coralie—not in any other way.”

“You would never, never, under any circumstances, make me your wife?”

“Why do you pain me so, Coralie?”

“I want a plain answer—you would never marry me? Say ‘yes’ or ‘no.’”

“No—since you force me into ungracious speech.”

“Thank you,” she said, bitterly; “I am answered—there can be no mistake. Sir Edgar, you speak your mind with honorable frankness. I have given you every chance to correct yourself, should you be mistaken. I am perhaps more richly endowed than you think for. Would my dowry make any difference?”

“No,” I replied, sternly; “and, Coralie, pray pardon me; it is high time that this should end.”

"It shall end at once," she replied. "It is to be war between us, Sir Edgar—war to the knife."

"There is no need for war," I said, wearily. "Let us forget all about it. There will be no need for you to do anything romantic, Coralie. Stay on at Crown Anstey, and make yourself happy with Clare."

"Yes," she replied, with that strange smile, "I shall remain at Crown Anstey—I have no thought of going away."

She turned as though she would quit the room. I went up to her.

"Good-night, Coralie. Shake hands, and let us part friends."

"When I touch your hand again, Sir Edgar, it will be under very different circumstances. Good-night."

She swept from the room with the dignity of an outraged queen, leaving me unhappy, bewildered, and anxious.

I had the most chivalrous love and devotion for all womankind, and I must confess to feeling most dreadfully shocked. It seemed almost unheard of.

Then I tried to forget it—the passionate words, the pale, tearful beauty of that wonderful face. Strange that Clare's conviction should so soon be realized. What of that nervous conviction she had that evil would come of this fair woman's love? What if that were realized too?

I sat late that night, dreaming not only of the pure, sweet girl I had won, but of the woman whose burning tears had fallen on my hands. What harm could she do if she tried? What did she mean by being richly dowered? Had she any fortune that I did not know of? Her words were mysterious. Strange to say, the same nervous forebodings that had seized Clare seized me.

Evil would come of it; how or why I could not imagine, but it would come. I felt it gathering round me; then I laughed at myself, at my own foolish fancy.

Yet the same fancy had shaken me so that when I went into Clare's room to say "Good-night," she asked me if I were ill, and would not be satisfied until I laughingly told her my happiness had been too much for me.

I felt shy as a girl the next morning at the thought of coming down-stairs to meet mademoiselle. Nor was I quite devoid of some little fear. Would she be sorrowful,

resigned, pathetic, angry, or what? It was impossible to tell.

Imagine my surprise on opening the breakfast-room door to find her already at the table, looking blooming and beautiful as a June rose. She greeted me gayly with bright smiles and bright words. I might have thought all the passion, the sorrow, and despair of last night a dream.

Only too happy to imitate her, I began to talk of a score of indifferent matters. About everything she had some piquant, bright words to say. By the time breakfast was ended I had really begun to think I must have dreamed the most unpleasant scene.

Yet I thought to myself that I must be guarded. I must continue to be kind to her because she had no other friends, but all kindness shown to her must be of the true, cousinly type.

This morning, instead of lingering with her while she went through the conservatories, as had been my idle fashion, I went at once into Clare's room. Coralie noticed the change, for her face grew pale as I quitted the room.

Some weeks passed without anything happening. I went over to Harden Manor every day. The sun never set without my seeing Agatha, and every day I loved her more and more.

She was so simple, so tender, so true; now that she had promised to be my wife, there was no idle coquetry about her, no affectation of shyness. She was simply perfect, and it seemed to me that by some wonderful miracle I had reached the golden land at last.

Then I began to agitate for an early marriage. Why wait? Lady Thesiger told me laughingly that there was much to do at Crown Anstey before I could take a wife home.

"Remember," she said, "that before your sister came, there had been no ladies at the Hall for some years. The late Lady Trevelyan died sixteen years ago."

I saw that she had completely forgotten the existence of mademoiselle, and did not care to remind her of it.

"You will want to refurnish a suite of rooms for Agatha," she continued; "and there will really be so much to do that if we say Christmas for the wedding, that will be quite soon enough."

"It seems like an eternity!" I said, discontentedly.

“It is the most picturesque season of the year for a wedding,” said Lady Thesiger. “I like the holly and evergreens even better than summer flowers.”

So it was settled. Clare agreed with Lady Thesiger that Crown Anstey required preparation for a bride.

“Those reception-rooms want refurnishing,” said my sister. “Of course, after your marriage you will give parties and balls. You will have to show hospitality to all the county, Edgar.”

Half to my consternation, she said this before Coralie. I looked at her hastily, wondering how she would take it. Her beautiful face was quite calm, and wore an expression of pleased interest.

“Do you agree with me, Coralie?” asked my unsuspecting sister.

“Certainly; there is no position in the county equal to that of Lady Trevelyan of Crown Anstey.”

“How strange it is, Edgar, that you should be married, and your wife Lady Trevelyan! Sometimes it seems to me all a dream.”

“Dreams come and go so lightly,” said Coralie, with that smile which always made me slightly afraid.

The remainder of that day we spent in making out a long list of all things needful. Coralie’s taste was paramount. She decided upon little matters of elegance we never even thought of. It was she who strongly advised me to send to London for Mr. Dickson, the well-known decorator.

“He will arrange a suite of rooms so perfectly that you will hardly know them,” she said.

So it was decided. Mr. Dickson came, and when he found there was to be no limit either to time, expense, money, or anything else, he promised me something that should make Crown Anstey famous.

All things went on perfectly. The magnificent preparations making for my darling occupied my time most happily. It was now almost the end of November, and our marriage was to take place on the 26th of December. Mr. Dickson and his army of workmen had taken their departure, and the rooms prepared for my wife were beyond all praise.

The boudoir was hung in blue and silver; it was a perfect little fairy-land; nothing was wanting to make it a

nest of luxury. The boudoir opened into a pretty little library, where all the books that I thought would please Agatha were arranged. There was a dressing-room, a bath-room, and a sleeping-room, all *en suite*. Mr. Dickson had improvised a pretty flight of stairs leading into a small conservatory, and that opened into the garden.

When the pictures, the flowers, the statues, the rich hangings, and the graceful ornaments were all arranged, I was more pleased than I had been for some time. Lady Thesiger came over to look at them, but my darling was not to see them until they were her own.

There was an unpleasant duty to perform: What was to be done with Coralie? Knowing Lady Thesiger's opinion of her, I felt sure she would never allow her daughter to live in the same house. What was to be done with her? Where was she to go? I did not know in the least what to suggest. I was perfectly willing to offer her a very handsome allowance, knowing that, as Sir Barnard's charge, she had some claim on me.

I might have spared myself all the trouble of thinking and deciding. One morning Mrs. Newsham, a pretty young matron, very popular in our neighborhood, paid us a visit.

Coralie, as usual, received her, and did the honors of the house. A very beautiful fountain had just been placed in the lawn, and we went to look at it. I had left the two ladies looking over the basin of the fountain while I raised the branches of a rare and valuable plant.

Stooping down, I did not hear the commencement of the conversation. When my attention was attracted, Mrs. Newsham was concluding a sentence with these words: "If ever you leave Crown Anstey."

I saw Coralie d'Aubergne look up at her with a quiet smile.

"I shall never leave Crown Anstey," she said, "under any possible circumstances."

Mrs. Newsham laughed.

"You may be married, or Lady Trevelyan may not like the place, and wish it closed—a thousand things may happen to prevent you remaining here always."

But I saw Coralie d'Aubergne shake her head, while she replied, calmly:

“No, Mrs. Newsham, I shall never leave Crown Anstey.”

I can not tell how the words impressed me; I found myself repeating them over and over again—“I shall never leave Crown Anstey.”

Yet she must have known that when my young wife came home, Crown Anstey would be no place for her.

Was there any meaning in the words she repeated so often, or did she say them merely with an idea of comforting herself?

It was that very evening that I sat by myself in the library arranging some papers, and thinking at the same time what I must say to Coralie, and how I must say it, when the door suddenly opened, and she entered.

I looked at her surprised, for she did not often intrude when I was alone and occupied. She was very pale; with quiet determination on her beautiful face, she walked up to me, and leaned her arm on the back of my chair.

“So, cousin,” she said, “this marriage is going on?”

“Certainly, Coralie. I pray God nothing may prevent it.”

“You would lose your reason, I suppose, if you lost Agatha?”

“I can not tell. I only know that, no matter how long I lived, life would have no further charm for me.”

She bent her head caressingly over me; her perfumed hair touched my face.

“Edgar,” she whispered, “once more I lose sight of my woman’s pride; once more I come to you and ask you—ah! do not turn from me—I ask you to give up Agatha, and—”

She paused, for very shame, I hope.

“Give up Agatha and marry you, you would say, Coralie?”

“Ah, dear, I love you so! You would never repent it. I would make you happy as a crowned king.”

I stopped her.

“Say no more, Coralie! I am grieved and shocked that you should renew the subject. I told you before I should never love any woman save Agatha Thesiger, were I to live forever.”

“Nothing will ever induce you to change your mind?” she asked, slowly.

“No; nothing in the wide world.”

She paused for a few minutes, then she quietly lifted her arm from the chair.

“Has it ever struck you,” she said, “it may be in my power to do you deadly mischief?”

“I never thought you capable of such a thing, nor do I believe that it is in your power.”

“It is,” she said; “you and your sister are both in my power. If you are a wise man, you will take my terms and save yourself while there is time. Of course, if I were Lady Trevelyan, my interests would be yours; then, if I knew anything against your welfare, I should keep the secret faithfully—ah! a thousand times more faithfully than if it concerned my own life.”

She looked earnestly at me.

“You hold no secrets of mine, Coralie; I have no secrets. Thank God, my life is clear and open—a book any one may read. Supposing I had a secret, I should not purchase the keeping of it by any such compromise as you suggest. I detest all mysteries, Coralie—all underhand doings, all deceit. Speak out and tell me, Coralie, what you mean.”

“I shall speak out when the time comes. Once more, Cousin Edgar, be reasonable; save yourself—save me.”

She withdrew some steps from me, and looked at me with her whole soul in her eyes.

“I will not hear another word, Coralie. I do not wish to offend you, or to speak harshly to you; but this I do say—if ever you mention this, to me, hateful subject, I will never voluntarily address you again, never while I live.”

She made no answer. She turned, with a dignified gesture, and quitted the room.

I never gave one serious thought to her threats, looking upon them as the angry words of an angry woman. They did not even remain upon my mind or disturb my rest.

CHAPTER XI.

THE day following, Lady Thesiger had arranged to come to Crown Anstey with Agatha, for the purpose of choosing from some very choice engravings that had been sent to me from London. I asked Sir John to accompany them

and stay to lunch. It was always a red-letter day for me when my darling came to my home, and I remember this one—ah, me!—so well. It was fine, clear, and frosty; the sky was blue; the sun shone with that clear gold gleam it has in winter; the hoar-frost sparkled on the leafless trees and hedges; the ground was hard, and seemed to ring beneath one's feet.

"A bright, clear day," said Coralie, as we sat at breakfast together.

"Yes," I replied. "Coralie, will you see that a good luncheon is served to-day? Sir John and Lady Thesiger are coming—Miss Thesiger, too—and they will remain for lunch."

Her face cleared and brightened.

"Coming to-day, are they? I am very glad."

I looked upon this as an amiable wish to atone for the unpleasantness of last night, and answered her in the same good spirit.

I am half ashamed to confess that when Agatha was coming I seldom did anything but stand, watch in hand, somewhere near the entrance gates. That I did to-day, and was soon rewarded by seeing the Harden carriage.

Ah, me! will the memory of that day ever die with me? My darling came, and seemed to me more beautiful than ever. Her sweet, frank eyes looked into mine, her pure, beautiful face had a delicate flush of delight, and I—God help me!—forgot everything while by her side.

We were all in the library. How I thanked God afterward that Clare had not felt well enough to have the engravings carried to her room, as I proposed! We sat round the large center-table on which the folios lay open, Sir John, who took great delight in such things, explaining to Lady Thesiger. I was showing Agatha those I liked best, when, quite unexpectedly, Coralie entered the room.

The moment I saw her face I knew that she meant mischief. Surely, woman's face never had so hard, so wicked a look before.

Sir John rose and bowed. Lady Thesiger looked, as she always did in the presence of mademoiselle, constrained and annoyed. Agatha's look was one of sheer surprise, for Coralie walked up to the table.

"Choosing engravings, Miss Thesiger?" she said, with an easy smile. "I must ask you to give me your atten-

tion for a short time. Perhaps you will not think the engravings of much importance after that."

She declined the chair Sir John placed for her with the hauteur of a grand duchess. As she stood there, calmly surveying us, she looked the most beautiful yet the most determined of women.

"May I ask," she said, "the exact date fixed for the marriage?"

Sir John answered her:

"The 26th of December, mademoiselle."

"May I ask," she said, "what Sir Edgar has thought of doing for me? Doubtless Lady Thesiger will have advised him. This has been my home for many years, and is my only home now. Has the question been considered? In the event of Sir Edgar bringing a young wife here, what is to become of me?"

There was a mocking smile on her beautiful face, her dark eyes flashed from one to the other of us; we felt uncomfortable. She had just hit upon the weak point that disturbed us all, the one cloud in the clear sky.

As no one else seemed inclined to speak, I answered:

"Everything will be done for your comfort, Coralie, you may be sure of that, for Sir Barnard's sake."

"And not for my own?" she said. "What is your idea of comfort, Sir Edgar? Do you propose offering me a little cottage, and a few pounds per week? That would not content me."

She looked so imperial, so beautiful, that I wondered involuntarily what would content her, she who might have anything.

"Whatever you yourself think right, Coralie, you shall have."

I saw a strong disapproval in Lady Thesiger's face, and Coralie's quick eyes, following mine, read the same.

"Ah!" she said, hastily, "Lady Thesiger does not approve of *carte blanche* to ambitious cousins."

Lady Thesiger really restrained herself; she was tempted to speak—I saw that—but refrained.

"The best plan," said Sir John, calmly, "would be for Mademoiselle d'Aubergne to say what she herself wishes."

"I will tell you," she replied, "what I claim."

Then, as we looked up at her in wonder, she continued, with bland calmness:

"I claim as my own and right, on the part of my infant son, the whole of the estate and revenues of Crown Anstey. I claim as widow of the late Miles Trevelyan, Esq., my share of all due to me at his death."

A thunder-bolt falling in our midst would not have alarmed us as those words did. Sir John looked sternly at her.

"In the name of Heaven, what do you mean?"

"Just what I say, Sir John. I was the wife, and am now the widow, of the late Miles Trevelyan, Esq."

"But that is monstrous!" he cried. "Miles was never married."

"Miles was married to me, Sir John."

"But we must have proof; your word goes for nothing. There must be indisputable proof of such an assertion."

She smiled with quiet superiority.

"Knowing with whom I have to contend, it is not probable that I should assert anything false. I am prepared to prove everything I say."

My darling's face grew white as death. I was bewildered. If this were true—oh, my God! if it were true—fortune, love, and everything else was lost.

"Where were you married?" asked Sir John.

"At Edgeton—St. Helen's, Edgeton. The Reverend Henry Morton married us, and the two witnesses were Sara Smith, who was my maid, and Arthur Ireton, who was head gamekeeper here at Crown Anstey."

It was all so quickly told, and so seemingly correct, we looked at one another in amaze.

"We must examine into it," said Sir John, "before going any further."

"That will be best," she replied, composedly. "I had better explain that Miles, poor fellow, fell in love with me the first time he saw me. Sir Barnard would not hear of such a thing. He told Miles that if he persisted in marrying me he would curse him. Perhaps he had his own reasons for not liking me. His son tried to obey him, but I am proud to say the love Miles had for me was far stronger than fear of his father. Still, for pecuniary reasons, he did not care to offend him, so we were married privately the second year of my stay at Crown Anstey."

She turned to Lady Thesiger with a mocking smile.

"I know perfectly well," she said, "why your ladyship

has never liked me. You met me walking one evening with Miles Trevelyan in the Anstey Woods; you saw him kiss me. You know now that he was my husband, and had a right to kiss me if he chose."

Lady Thesiger bowed very stiffly.

"Two years after our marriage," Coralie continued, "my little son, called Rupert, after the Crusader Trevelyan, was born. Under the pretense of visiting some of my relations, I went to Lincoln. In the registry of the church of St. Morton Friars you will find the proper attestation of my son's birth."

"Where is that son?" asked Sir John, incredulously.

"At Lincoln. I can send for him. You can go there and see him; he is under the care of Sarah Smith, my nurse. He is living and well, and he, not Mr. Edgar, is the heir of Crown Anstey."

"But why," asked Sir John, incredulously, "why have you never told this story before? It seems incredible that you should have waited until now."

"I have had my own reasons," she replied. "I waited first to see what Sir Edgar would be like; then, when I saw him—I—I need not be ashamed to own it, even before Miss Thesiger—I liked him, and if he had been reasonable I should never have told my story at all."

"That is," said Sir John, with supreme disgust, "if Edgar had been duped by you, and had married you, you would have defrauded your son of his rights?"

"Yes," she replied, with a smile; "it is Crown Anstey I love, and I would rather be the wife than the mother of the master of Crown Anstey."

"You are a wicked woman," he said, sternly.

"I am a successful one," she retorted. "Pray, Sir John, examine all these proofs at your earliest convenience; I am anxious to take my place as mistress of my own house; I am anxious to have my child here in his own home."

We all rose; no words can express my emotions. It was not the fortune, God knows—not the fortune; but I knew when I lost that, I lost Agatha.

I felt my face growing white as death itself, and my hands trembled.

"One moment," I said. "A year ago the doctor told me if my sister kept up her strength, and had nothing to

make her either anxious nor unhappy, she would in all probability recover. Now, whether this story be true or false, I pray you all, for God's sake, keep it from her!"

"I shall not mention it," said Coralie.

"Do not despair, Edgar," said Sir John. "I do not believe—I never shall."

"I wrote to London last night," continued Coralie, "for Mr. Dempster, who was Sir Barnard's lawyer on one or two occasions. You, of course, Mr. Edgar Trevelyan, will retain the services of the family solicitors."

"I shall need no solicitors if your story be true. I shall not seek to defraud Miles's son of his birthright; I shall yield it to him."

"You will find it true in every particular," she said; "and remember always that it is your own fault I have told it."

With that parting shot she quitted the room.

"My poor boy," said Sir John, "this is a terrible blow for you."

"I am afraid," said Lady Thesiger, "that this abominable woman has spoken the truth. I always thought poor Miles had something on his mind—some secret. I told him so one day, and he did not deny it."

My darling came up to me with her sweet, pale face and outstretched hands.

"Never mind, Edgar," she said. "If you lose Crown Anstey, I will try to love you all the more to make up for it."

What could I do but bless her and thank her? Yet I knew—God help me!—I knew in losing my fortune I lost her!

CHAPTER XII.

THE little party that had so gayly assembled in the old library broke up in the deepest gloom. Sir John was the only one who seemed at all incredulous.

"Rely upon it," he said, "that, after all, it is some trick of the French woman's."

But Lady Thesiger had no such hope.

"I felt sure there was something wrong with Miles," she said. "He was not happy; he had married in haste and repented at leisure."

For my own part, I had no hope. Remembering the subtle, seductive beauty of the woman, I could well imagine Miles being led, even against himself, into a marriage or anything else.

When they were gone, I went back to the library. I wanted to face this terrible blow alone, to realize the possibility that instead of being Sir Edgar Trevelyan, of Crown Anstey, wealthy, honored, and powerful, I was Edgar Trevelyan, poor, homeless, and penniless.

Could it be possible that after this life of ease, luxury, and happiness, I was to fall back into the old position—hard, monotonous labor, with eighty pounds per annum?

It seemed too hard. Do not think any the worse of me, reader, if I own that the tears came into my eyes. It was bitterly hard.

Without warning Coralie entered the room. It must have been a triumph to her to see the tears in my eyes. She stood at some little distance from me.

“Edgar,” she asked, “do you hate me?”

“No; I am too just to hate you for claiming what is your own. You ought to have told me before, Coralie. It has been most cruel to let me live in this delusive dream. If you had told me that night when I came here first, it would have been a momentary disappointment, but I should have gone back to my work none the worse for it.”

“I might have done it, but I saw in this, my secret power, the means of winning you. Edgar, it is not too late even now. Make me mistress of Crown Anstey, and I will find the means of restoring your lost position to you.”

I turned from her in unutterable loathing. She was so lost to all womanly honor and delicacy, my whole soul revolted against her.

“Not another word, Coralie. I would not take Crown Anstey from you if the alternative were death!”

“That is very decisive,” she replied, with the mocking smile I dreaded. “We shall see.”

“You will keep your word to me?” I cried, hastily. “You will say nothing to Clare? She will soon be well. I could not bear to have any obstacles thrown in the way of her recovery. When I leave her, my friends will make some arrangements to spare her the shock of knowing why—at least, for a time.”

“I shall respect your wishes, Edgar. I have no desire to hurt your sister. She is quite safe, so far as I am concerned.”

It may be imagined that I did not sleep very well that night. Early on the following morning Sir John rode over.

“The sooner we look into this affair, the better,” he said. “We will ride over to Edgeton to-day, and examine the church register.”

We did so. Alas! there was no mistake; the marriage had been celebrated on the 14th of June. The two witnesses, as she said, were Sarah Smith and Arthur Ireton. The marriage service had been performed by the Reverend Henry Morton.

The entry was perfectly regular, no flaw in it. Sir John’s face fell as he read it.

“Now,” he said, “the marriage laws in England are very strict; there is no evading them. If this marriage is perfectly legal, we shall find an entry of it in the registrar’s books. We must pay for a copy of the certificate.”

We went to the registrar’s office. There, sure enough, was the entry, all perfectly legal and straightforward.

“Now,” said Sir John, “before we rest let us find out the Reverend Henry Morton, and see what he knows about it.”

That involved a journey to Leamington, where he was then residing. We found him without any difficulty. He remembered the marriage, and had no hesitation in answering any questions about it. He knew Miles Trevelyan, and had remonstrated with him over the marriage. But what could he do? Miles was of full age, and told him frankly that if he refused to marry him, some one else would.

“I have been ill and occupied,” he said, “and have heard nothing of the Trevelyans since I left Edgeton. However, if my evidence and solemn assurance are of any service, you have them. They were properly and legally married; nothing in the world can upset that fact.”

“So it seems,” said Sir John, with a deep sigh. “Edgar, you have lost Crown Anstey.”

The next day I wrote to Moreland & Paine, asking one or both to come over at once. Mr. Paine arrived the same evening, and looked very grave when he was in full pos-

session of the case. He had a long interview with Mrs. Trevelyan, as we all called her now, also with her solicitor, Mr. Dempster. Then he sought me.

"This is a bad business, Mr. Trevelyan," he said; and by his ceasing to use the title, I knew he had given up all hope of my cause. "Of course," he continued, "you can go to law if you like, but I tell you quite honestly you have no chance. The evidence is clear and without a flaw; nothing can shake it. If you have a lawsuit, you will lose it, and probably have to pay all costs."

I told him that I had no such intention, that if the estate were not legally mine, I had no wish to claim it.

"It was a very sad thing for you, Mr. Trevelyan. I am heartily grieved for you."

"I must bear it like a man. I am not the first who has lost a fortune."

But Sir John would not hear of my final arrangements until we had been to Lincoln and had seen the child.

"No one knows the depth of those French women," he said. "It is possible there may be no child. Let us take her by surprise this very day, and ask her to accompany us to the house where the nurse lives."

Both lawyers applauded the idea.

"If there be any imposture, we are sure to find it out," they said.

Without a minute's loss of time Mrs. Trevelyan was asked to join us in the library. She complied at once.

"We want you to go with us to Lincoln to show us the child," said Sir John, abruptly.

She consented at once so readily that I felt certain that our quest was useless. We started in an hour's time, my poor Clare being led to believe that we had gone to Harden on a visit.

We reached Lincoln about six o'clock at night. While we stood in the station waiting for a cab, Mr. Paine turned suddenly to Coralie.

"What is the address?" he asked.

Again there was not a moment's hesitation.

"No. 6 Lime Cottages, Berkdale Road," she replied; and fast as a somewhat tired horse could take us we went there.

We reached the place at last; a row of pretty cottages that in summer must have been sheltered by the lime-

trees, and the door of No. 6 was quickly opened to us—opened by a woman with a pleasant face, who looked exceedingly astonished at seeing us. Coralie came forward.

“I had no time to write and warn you of this visit, Mrs. Smith. Be kind enough to answer any questions these gentlemen may wish to ask you.”

We all made way for Mr. Paine. I shall never forget the group, the anxiety and suspense on each face.

“Have you a child here in your charge?” asked the lawyer.

But she looked at Coralie.

“Am I to answer, madame?”

“You are to answer any question put to you; my story is known.”

“Have you a child here in your charge?” he repeated.

“I have,” she replied.

“Who is it? Tell us in your own words.”

“He is the son of Mr. Miles Trevelyan and his wife, who was Mademoiselle d’Aubergne.”

“Where were they married?” he asked.

“They were married at the church of St. Helen’s, Edgeton. I was one witness; the other was Arthur Ireton, the head gamekeeper.”

“Where was this child born?” he asked again.

“Here, sir, at this house. Mrs. Trevelyan left home, it was believed, to visit some friends. She came here and took this house. I remained with her, and have had charge of little Master Rupert ever since.”

He asked fifty other questions; they were answered with equal clearness and precision.

“Let us see the child,” said Sir John, impatiently.

She went into the next room and brought out a lovely little boy. He was asleep, but at the sound of strange voices opened his eyes.

“Mamma!” he cried, when he saw Coralie, and she took him in her arms.

Sir John looked earnestly at him.

“There is no mistake,” he said; “we want no further evidence. I can tell by his face this is poor Miles’s son.”

He was a lovely, bright-eyed boy; he had Coralie’s golden-brown hair, which fell in thick ringlets down his pretty neck.

"But it is Miles's face," Sir John repeated, and we did not doubt him. "There remains but one thing more to make the whole evidence complete. We must see the registration of the birth of the child, and it would be better to see the doctor who attended you, madame."

We did both on the following day. The registration of the child's birth was right, perfect, and without a flaw.

The doctor, a highly respectable medical practitioner offered us his evidence on oath.

There was nothing left, then, but to return to Crown Anstey and give up possession.

I loved the little boy. It was too absurd to feel any enmity against him. He was so bright and clever; it would have been unmanly not to have loved dead Miles's son.

Of Coralie Trevelyan I asked but one favor: that she would allow me one week in which to make some arrangement for Clare before she brought the young heir home. She cheerfully agreed to this.

"You bear your reverses bravely," she said.

"Better than I bore prosperity," I replied; and that, God knows, was true.

This new trial had braced my nerves, and made me stronger than I had ever been in my whole life before.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE arrangement made for my sister was one I knew not how to be grateful enough for. Lady Thesiger insisted that she should go to Harden, and remain there until she was well.

"She need know nothing of your misfortune yet. We have but to say that she must be kept quiet, and admit no visitors except such as we can trust to say nothing to her. Agatha and myself will take the greatest care of her, and when she has recovered we will break the news to her."

I was deeply grateful. It was all arranged without exciting my sister's suspicions. She told her that for many reasons it had been considered better to put off the marriage for some time, that I was going abroad for a year, and that she was to spend that year with Lady Thesiger.

She looked wistfully at me.

"It's all very sudden, Edgar. Are you sure it is for the best?"

I steadied my voice and told her laughingly it was all for the best.

She asked where Coralie would be, and I told her that when she returned from the visit she was paying she would remain at Crown Anstey.

There was not a dry eye among the servants when my sister was carried from the home where she had been so happy. Of course, they all knew the story—it had spread like wild-fire all over the neighborhood—yet every one understood how vitally important it was that it should be kept from her.

Can I ever tell in words how kindly Lady Thesiger received her? True friends, they took no note of altered fortunes. My sister was comfortably installed in the charming rooms they had prepared for her. Her favorite maid was to stay with her.

Then came the agony I had long known must come. I must give up Agatha. How could I, who had not one shilling in my pocket, marry the daughter of Sir John Thesiger, a girl delicate and refined, who had been brought up in all imaginable luxury? Let me work hard as I might, I could hardly hope to make two hundred a year. In all honor and in all conscience I was bound to give her up.

I had no prospect before me but that of returning to my former position as clerk. Agatha Thesiger must never be a clerk's wife, she who could marry any peer in the land.

Talk of waiting and hoping! I had nothing to hope for. The savings of my whole life would not keep her, as she had been kept, for even one year.

I must give her up. Ah, my God! it was hard—so bitterly hard! I told Sir John, and he looked wretched as myself.

"I see, I see. It is the only thing to be done. If I could give her a fortune, you should not lose her; but I can not, and she must not come to poverty."

Lady Thesiger wept bitterly over me.

"I foresaw it from the first," she said. "I knew it was not the loss of Crown Anstey, but the loss of Agatha would be your sorest trial."

Then I said "good-bye" to her whom I had hoped so

soon to call my wife. I kissed her white face and trembling hands for the last time.

But the dear soul clung to me, weeping.

“You may say you must leave me a thousand times, Edgar, but I shall never be left. I shall wait for you; and if it be never in your power to claim me, I shall marry no other man. I will be yours in death as in life.”

And though I tried to shake her resolution, I knew that it would be so. I knew that no other man would ever call her wife.

The day before I left, Mrs. Trevelyan, with the little Sir Rupert, took possession of the Hall. She must have found many thorns in her path, for although she had attained her heart's desire, and was now mistress of Crown Anstey, she was shunned and disliked by all the neighborhood.

“An adventuress” they called her, and as such refused to receive her into their society. Perhaps she had foreseen this when she wished to marry me.

By Sir John's influence, the post of secretary was found for me with an English nobleman residing in Paris. I was to live in the house, my duties were sufficiently onerous, and I was to receive a salary of one hundred and fifty pounds per annum; so that, after all, I was better off than I had once expected to be.

I bid farewell to Agatha, to Clare, to my kind friends Sir John and Lady Thesiger. God knew my grief; I can not describe it.

On my road to the station I met the Crown Anstey carriage. Mrs. Trevelyan bowed to me from it. She was taking a drive with the little Sir Rupert.

“God bless the child!” I said, as his little face smiled from the carriage window. “God bless him, and send him a happy life!”

It took me some little time to settle down to my new life. My employer, Lord Winter, lived in the Champs Elysées. He preferred Paris to England, because it was brighter and gayer. I often wondered how that mattered to him, for he lived only in his books.

I was required to assist him in making extracts, answering letters, searching for all kinds of odd information; and I do believe I learned more in that time than I should have done in a life-time differently spent.

I became reconciled to it after a hard struggle. From Harden Manor I constantly received the kindest letters. Agatha wrote to me, and although the word "love" seldom occurred in her letters, I knew her heart was, and always would be mine. She would never forget me, nor would that crown of all sorrows be mine—I should never have to give her up to a wealthier rival. Although she said nothing of the kind in her letters, I felt that it was true.

A year passed, and at last came good tidings of my sister; she was able to sit up, even to walk across the room, and the doctor said another month would in all probability find her able to take her place in the world again.

How that gladdened my heart! Lady Thesiger said she had not the least idea yet of the change in my fortunes, although she wondered incessantly why I was absent.

"Have no fear for your sister's future," wrote kind Lady Thesiger. "While Agatha lives at home she is a most charming companion for her. Should she ever leave home, she would be the same to me. We shall only be too happy if she will spend her life at Harden Manor."

I was grateful for that. Now, then, fate seemed kinder. I could fight through for myself, providing that my fragile, delicate Clare was safely taken care of.

Another six months passed. Clare knew all then, and was resigned. God had been very good to her. She could walk; distance did not fatigue her; and the doctors thought it was very unlikely that the same disease would attack her again.

She wrote and told me about it.

"I was out yesterday," she said, "with Agatha, and we met the Crown Anstey carriage. Coralie was most gracious, overwhelmend me with congratulations, invited me to the Hall. And I saw the little Sir Rupert. He is so bright and beautiful, the most princely boy I ever beheld. 'I am going to have a white pony,' he said to me, and I kissed him, Edgar, with all my heart. Coralie inquired very minutely after you, and asked me if I owed her any ill-will for what she had done. I said no, not in the least, and that I hoped little Sir Rupert would live to make her very happy. I am not quite sure, but I think there were tears glistening in her eyes when she drove away."

Some weeks afterward I received the following letter from Mrs. Trevelyan:

“MY DEAR EDGAR,—Once again I address you—once again, setting pride and all things aside, I offer you Crown Anstey. You have been away some time now, and know how different is your present hard life from the happy, luxurious one you led here. Your engagement with Miss Thesiger is, of course, broken off. I hear she has a wealthy suitor—Lord Abberley. It will be a good match for her. Edgar, you will find no one in the wide world so true to you as myself. See, I forget all the past. Once more I offer you my love, my hand, and with it, until my son is of age, Crown Anstey. I never intended you to give it up as you have done. I always wished to offer yourself and your sister an income sufficient for your maintenance. I have not done so before because I hoped that poverty would seem so hateful to you you would gradually come to think better of my offer. Is it so, Edgar? Will you recognize my love, my fidelity, my devotion at last? One word, and all your troubles cease, you are back again in the beautiful old home, and I am happy. Only one word. From your ever-loving, devoted

“CORALIE.”

I need not repeat my answer. It was, No! I was no more free, no more inclined to return to Crown Anstey than I had been to remain there.

After that there was a long silence. Agatha told me herself all about Lord Abberley; he had been very kind to her, was very fond of her, but she had told him our story, and he had most generously forborne to press his suit.

Time was doing much for me; every hour was golden in its acquisition of fresh knowledge and learning. All the blanks in my life were filled by books. God send every one the same comfort I had.

CHAPTER XIV.

It was just three years since I had left Crown Anstey. Lord Winter told me I should have some weeks to myself, but he was so incessantly occupied I never liked to ask for them.

I had never seen or heard anything of Crown Anstey

since I left it. At Harden Manor all was the same, unchanged and unaltered.

One morning, when I went into the library, a letter lay waiting for me. I saw that it was Coralie's handwriting, and my first impulse was to burn it unread. Why should she write to me again? Her letters only pained me. I threw it aside and began my work—in the busy occupation of the morning I forgot all about it.

I did not open it until evening. It was from Coralie, but it only held these few words:

“EDGAR,—My boy—my beautiful boy—is dying. Come to me; for if I lose him I shall die too. In my distress I would rather have you near me than any one else.

“CORALIE TREVELYAN.”

Was it true, or was it an invention? Poor little Rupert dying! Why, no one had even told me he was ill. Perhaps I had better go. No mother could be so cold and so wicked as to feign death for her only child.

Lord Winter raised no objection.

It was not very convenient, he said, but of course he “must bow to necessity.”

I was in time to catch the mail train. Eight o'clock found me the next morning in London, and, without waiting for rest or refreshment, I started at once for Crown Anstey.

It was only too true. I found my old home full of the wildest confusion; women were weeping and wringing their hands—the whole place was in disorder.

I was shown into the library, and in a few minutes Coralie came to me. I hardly recognized her; her face was white, her eyes were dim with long watching and bitter tears.

“I knew you would come,” she said. “He is dying—Edgar; nothing in the world can save him. Come with me.”

I followed her to the pretty chamber where little Sir Rupert lay. Yes, he was dying, poor child! He lay on the pretty white bed; a grave-faced doctor was near; the nurse, Sarah Smith, sat by his side.

His mother went up to him.

“No better! No change!” she cried, wringing her hands. “Oh, my God! must I lose him? Must he die?”

He was my unconscious rival; his little life stood between me and all I valued most, yet I knelt and prayed God, as I had never prayed before, that He would spare him. I would have given Crown Anstey twice over for that life; but it was not to be.

"Do not disturb him with cries," said the doctor to his mother, "he has not long to live."

She knelt by his side in silence, her face colorless as that of a marble statue, the very picture of desolation, the very image of woe.

Once she raised her dark eyes to the doctor's face.

"If I offered to die for him," she said, "would that be of any use?"

"God's will be done," said the doctor. "It is your child that is called, not you."

So for some minutes we sat; the little breath grew fainter and more feeble, the gray shadow deepened on the lovely face.

"Mamma!" he cried. "I see! I see!"

She bent over him, and that moment he died.

I can never forget it—the wild, bitter anguish of that unhappy woman, how she wept, how she tore her hair, how she called her child back by every tender name a mother's love could invent.

It was better, the doctor said, that the first paroxysm of grief should have full vent. All attempts at comfort and consolation were unavailing. I raised her from the ground, and when she saw my face she cried:

"Oh, Edgar, Edgar, it is my punishment!"

I did my best to console her. I told her that her little child would be better off in heaven than were he master of fifty Crown Ansteys. But I soon found that my words fell on deaf ears; she was unconscious.

"I do not like the look of Mrs. Trevelyan," said the doctor. "I should not be surprised to find that she has caught the fever herself. If so, in her present state of agitation, it will go hard with her."

He was right; before sunset Coralie lay in the fierce clutches of the fever, insensible to everything.

I do not like dwelling on this part of the story, it is so long, long since it all happened, but the memory of it stings like a sharp pain.

Clare came to nurse her, and everything that human

science and skill could suggest was done to save her. It was all in vain.

We buried the little child on the Tuesday morning, when the sun was shining and the birds were singing in the trees, and on the Saturday they told us his mother could not live.

It was early on the dawn of the Sunday morning when they sent for me. She was dying, and wished to speak to me.

I went into her room. Clare knelt by her side. She turned her white face to me with a smile.

"Edgar," she said, "I am glad you have come. I want to—to die in your arms. Bend down to me," she whispered, "I want to speak to you. Will you forgive me? I can see now how wrong I was, how wicked to love you so much, and how wicked to tell you so. Will you forgive me, and now that I am dying say one kind word to me, and tell me you can respect me in death?"

I pillowed that dying head on my arm, and told her I should only remember of her what had been kind and good.

"You will only remember that I loved you, Edgar, not that I was unwomanly and wicked?"

"I will forget everything, except that you were my dear cousin and dear friend."

"You will marry Agatha," she said, faintly, "and bring her home here. I hope you will be happy; but, oh, Edgar, Edgar, when she is your wife, and you are so happy together, you will not forget me; you will stroll out sometimes when the dew is falling, to look at my grave, and say, 'Poor Coralie! how well she loved me—so well, so dearly.' You will do that, Edgar?"

My tears fell warm and fast on her face.

"Are these your tears? Then you care a little for me. Ah, then, I am willing to die!"

And so, with her head pillowed on my arm, and a smile on her lips, she died.

Ah, believe me, reader, though my after life was happy as a king's, I would sooner little Rupert and Coralie had lived. God knows I am speaking the truth.

We buried her by the side of Miles Trevelyan. After life's fitful fever she sleeps well.

From the first hour of her illness the doctor had no hope

of her. I learned afterward that for some time before the child took the fever she had been ailing and ill.

It was such a strange life. Thinking over it afterward, it seemed to me more like romance than reality.

A year passed before the dream of my life was fulfilled and Agatha came to Crown Anstey. I need not say how happy we were.

Lady Trevelyan is the most beloved and popular lady in the county; our children are growing up good and happy; we have not a care of trouble in the world; and the sharpest pain I have is the memory of Coralie.

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